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Queer Confessions:
Transgression, Affect, and National Crisis in the Philippines' Call Center Industry

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Confession as Queer Sight and Sound

In February 2010, a video of a young Filipino call center worker confessing his HIV-positive status was uploaded to YouTube by the workers' activist group, AKMA-PTM (*Aksyon Magsasaka Partido Tinig ng Masa* or Farmer's Movement—Voice of the Masses). The 20-year old, referring to himself by the pseudonym "Joseph Ryan," appears in complete disguise: a dark baseball cap shields his eyes, while a cloth and a hospital mask cover the rest of his face and his ears. Ryan speaks, however, with a clear, ostensibly unaltered voice. Expressing himself in Taglish, he says the following:

Ako po si Joseph Ryan. I am a call center agent and I am...I am HIV positive. I have decided to come out in public to clarify the rumor that working at a call center leads to acquiring HIV. Nakuha ko po ang aking sakit sa isang tao na nakilala ko sa isang street party sa Quezon City. Hindi po siya taga-call center. [audible sobbing] Siya po'y nagtatrabaho sa isang hospital sa may Bulacan. I acquired HIV because I did not practice safe sex. I thought since I was young and healthy, hindi ako tatalaban ng kahit na anong sakit. And dahil din siguro ito sa aking carelessness. I wish to apologize to my parents, my friends at sa mga team mates ko sa call center. Patawarin nyo po sana ako. Ako ay nananawagan sa mga tao o sa publiko, huwag nyo po sana kaming husgahan sa pagiging call center agent just because you see us smoking and hanging around Ortigas. Alam ba ninyong we are a huge

contributor sa Philippine economy. And there are already 500,000 agents today. I am now undergoing treatment. Once I regain my strength, I will try to live a normal life again so that I can support my family. And to my fellow call center agents, please, please, be protected and please practice safe sex. *Maraming salamat po.*¹

[I am Joseph Ryan. I am a call center agent and I am...I am HIV positive. I have decided to come out in public to clarify the rumor that working at a call center leads to acquiring HIV. I contracted the disease from someone I met at a street party in Quezon City. This person is not from a call center. [audible sobbing] This person works in a hospital in Bulacan. I acquired HIV because I did not practice safe sex. I thought since I was young and healthy, I will be immune to any kind of disease. I suppose this is also due to my carelessness. I wish to apologize to my parents, my friends, and to my teammates at the call center. Please forgive me. I would like to appeal to the public: please do not judge us for being call center agents, just because you see us smoking and hanging around Ortigas. Please know that we are huge contributors to the Philippine economy. And there are already 500,000 agents today. I am now undergoing treatment. Once I regain my strength, I will try to live a normal life again so that I can support my family. And to my fellow call center agents, please, please, be protected and please practice safe sex. Thank you very much.]²

The “rumor” that Ryan refers to—“that working at a call center leads to acquiring HIV”—can be traced in part to an unsettling report issued by representatives of the Philippine General Hospital (PGH) a month earlier. The report stated that the number of people testing positive for the human immunodeficiency virus at the hospital’s Infectious Disease Treatment Complex had risen dramatically since March 2009.³ By the end of the year, new HIV cases would number 835—the highest in twenty-five years. By January 2010, the Philippine National AIDS/HIV Registry was reporting that 4,567 Filipinos were infected with HIV, with a more realistic estimate

¹Joseph Ryan /AKMA-PTM. “HIV Infected Call Center Agent,” YouTube.com, February 28, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcaPPMo7TEM>.

² Translation by Agnes “Bing” Magtoto.

³ “Cabral vows to intensify gov’t info drive against HIV/AIDS,” *Philippine News Agency*, January 29, 2010; “HIV cases soar among Filipino yuppies, call center workers,” abs.cbnnews.com, January 27, 2010.

putting that figure around 9,000.⁴ In the first ten months of 2010 alone, the number of cases shot up to 1,305.⁵ This news was further qualified by another piece of information: a substantial number of new carriers of the virus were employees of call centers—one of the nation's most lucrative industries.⁶

This essay uses the Joseph Ryan video as an occasion to think through a number of threads connecting sexuality, disease, labor, globalization, and the Philippines in postcolonial, national, and transnational perspectives. In the weeks following the PGH's report on rising HIV rates amongst Filipinos, the Joseph Ryan video became part of a constellation of often alarmist national news coverage about the possible links between call center workers' sexual culture and exposure to HIV.⁷ The media giant ABS-CBN, for example, showed neither nuance nor tact in its coverage, as its January 27th headline read "HIV cases soar among Filipino yuppies,

⁴ Johanna D. Poblete, "HIV-AIDS: The frightening reality," *BusinessWorld*, March 12, 2010.

⁵ Johanna D. Poblete, "AIDS advisory body to lobby for stronger law," *BusinessWorld*, January 10, 2011. This dramatic increase in numbers ran counter to what have historically been low rates of HIV infection amongst the Philippine population. The latter has puzzled epidemiologists and public health officials since the first case of AIDS in the Philippines was recorded in 1984. Moreover, low rates of HIV infection in the Philippines are not thought to be caused by underreporting. In 2003, for example, the number of reported cases of HIV stood at 1,810 people. Even if one quintupled this figure to get a more realistic estimate of 9,400 HIV-positive people, as the United Nations did, the figure would still have represented only .01 percent of the population. By contrast, in Vietnam, which had roughly the same population as the Philippines in 2003—around 84 million—about 130,000 people were HIV positive. As the *New York Times* reported, Costa Rica, a country with a similar number of people with the virus as the Philippines, had only one-twentieth of the Philippines' population. See Seth Mydans, "Low Rate of AIDS Virus in Philippines is a Puzzle," *New York Times*, 20 April 2003.

⁶ Revenue from the Philippines IT-BPO (Information Technology-Business Process Outsourcing) Industry in 2009 was 7.1 billion USD, or 4.5 percent of the Philippines' Gross Domestic Product, representing over 100 percent growth in the industry from the previous year. Jojo Uligan, "Philippine Contact Industry Report, 2012," *Call Center Association of the Philippines*.

⁷ The Philippines' ABS-CBN followed up on the release of Joseph Ryan video with the following report: "Ex-Call Center Agent Shares His Story," *YouTube.com*, March 1, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGPq5ZIT-Ig>. Two days later, TV 5 news had a similar story: "AKMA-PTM Party List on Channel 5," *YouTube.com*, March 3, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpgUcQQtP1o>.

call center workers; Casual sex, orgies are seen as possible cause of the problem.”⁸ In turn, journalists also reported on call center employees’ response to the news, revealing the latter’s concerns for both the spread of AIDS as a “silent epidemic” as well as the reputation of the call center industry.⁹

Coupled with the information about rising numbers of HIV cases, this national news coverage points to the emergence of an epistemological crisis—that is, intense uncertainty on the part of call center workers, public officials, the media, and members of the public, about how to understand the ostensible links, if any, between call centers, sex, and HIV/AIDS. The Joseph Ryan video, I argue, expresses and attempts to resolve this crisis out of concern for not only the biophysical health of a certain sector of the Philippine working population but also anxiety about how one of the nation’s most prized industries enables the expression and exploration of non-normative sexual identities and sexual practices of its workers. My analysis of Ryan’s testimony thus reaches far beyond an epidemiological concern with HIV/AIDS to touch on the social, cultural, and political economic conditions from which the Joseph Ryan video emerged in 2010. Throughout the essay, I draw connections between the video and observations from my larger ethnographic project on Filipino call center workers in Manila and Bacolod City in order to address the following questions: What conditions of possibility—in sexual culture, work culture, and labor

⁸ “HIV cases soar.” See also Antonio Figueroa, “Rise in HIV/AIDS cases in Philippines Alarming,” *Digital Journal* January 30, 2010.

⁹ “No Link between Call Centers and HIV Spread?” abs-cbnNEWS.com, February 10, 2010, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/lifestyle/02/09/10/no-link-between-call-centers-and-hiv-spread>.

activism—entail a performance such as Ryan’s? What national discourses and conversations is Ryan responding to when, in the midst of an expression of *hiya*, or shame, he reminds listeners of call center workers’ contributions to the Philippine economy? Finally, what does it mean to *appear* in complete *disguise* and to issue an anonymous apology to friends, family, coworkers, and the public through a potentially far-reaching venue like YouTube? And what does it mean for Ryan’s voice and affect to come to the surface, while his embodiment and identity remain conspicuously suppressed? I offer some tentative answers to these questions as a contribution to a discussion of queer sites/sights and sounds in the contemporary Philippines.

Queer Bodies

I begin, as the video demands, with acknowledgement of the body in the chair. With his physical features almost completely obscured but his voice clear as day, Ryan plays the part of the seemingly disembodied customer service or technical support agent who answers calls coming from the other side of the world (usually from the United States) and often during grueling overnight shifts. Wearing a black turtleneck sweater, Ryan’s torso appears to coalesce with the office chair he sits on, while his ear coverings adopt the shape of the headphones that agents wear while taking calls. Indeed, since 2011, the number of bodies filling what industry mavens refer to as “seats” in the Philippine Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry—the official name of the call center industry—has surpassed that of India, making the Philippines the call center capital of the world; this is especially the case with

outsourced work that requires real-time communication with a live person, or what are referred to as “voice accounts.”¹⁰ Joseph Ryan’s appearance thus constitutes a haunted reminder of the embodiment that immaterial/digital labor processes always already require, and the working bodies that create billions of dollars in revenue for global capital and the Philippines on a daily—but especially nightly—basis. Ryan’s cadaverous image also reminds viewers of the reasons that overnight work is referred to as the *graveyard* shift.

Young Filipino bodies—especially as repositories and signifiers of gender and sexuality—are at the center of public concerns about the culture of the call center industry in the Philippines.¹¹ Many of these concerns are anchored by images of Filipino call center workers circulating within the city after dark and living lifestyles of vice and conspicuous consumption made available by the relatively high wages that the industry offers.¹² Ryan’s reference to call center workers “smoking and hanging around Ortigas”—a commercial and entertainment hub in Metro Manila where young people congregate at night and on weekends—speaks implicitly to this discourse. In the industry’s early years, call centers were even compared to another type of work involving bodies at night: sex work. Making a pun on the word “call,” Filipino agents would sometimes humorously refer to themselves as “call boys” or “call girls”—local terms for sex workers. Such jokes index the more pervasive fear

¹⁰ Vikas Bajaj, “A New Capital of Call Centers,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2012.

¹¹ I refer to these as “public concerns” insofar as they are represented in news media.

¹² In her book *Working the Night Shift*, geographer Reena Patel describes the stigmatization of Indian call center workers’ earnings as a discourse of “fast money.” See Reena Patel, *Working the Night Shift: Women in India’s Call Center Industry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

that some call centers deliver customer service of the erotic variety, as evinced in an August 2010 article about a local city councilor receiving reports that call centers and Internet cafés in his town were transformed into “sex cybernets.”¹³ Here, we arrive at a crucial piece of the context from which Joseph Ryan makes his confession: the sexualization of the Philippine call center industry. By “sexualize,” I mean that the Philippine call center industry and Filipino call center workers have come to signify and be signified by sexual terms and ideas. Call centers, these reports imply, pose a threat to the social order by enabling the commodification and circulation of sexualized bodies and images in and between public and private space. Indeed, the very concept of the cyber-sex den sexualizes not only the laboring bodies of call center workers and their workplaces but the entire technological, material, and corporeal assemblage in which the global call center is embedded.¹⁴

Another significant piece of the cultural context of Ryan’s video is what I am calling the queering of the Philippine call center industry, which in turn is linked to the industry’s routine hiring and promoting of gay, lesbian, and cross-dressing people.¹⁵ Call center workers speak of this as the industry’s “openness” and “non-traditional” character, given that Philippine law protects only a person’s gender, race, and religious creed—and not sexuality—against discrimination in employment. An

¹³ “Laoag dad calls for regulation of internet cafes,” *Philippine News Agency*, August 12, 2010.

¹⁴ See also Radha Hegde, “Spaces of Exception: Violence, Technology, and the Transgressive Gendered Body in India’s Global Call Centers,” *Circuits of Visibility: Gender and Transnational Media Cultures*, ed. Radha Hegde (New York: New York University Press, 2011): 178-195.

¹⁵ I use the latter descriptors, and not “LGBTQ,” because of their use by my interviewees. As I discuss at length in my larger book project, the concept of using LGBTQ to name sexual identity does not have the same legibility in the Philippines as it does in Euro-American contexts. See also Boellstorff 2005, Hoad 2007, Manalansan 2003, and Sinnot 2004, in this essay’s bibliography.

informal account of call center worker demographics puts the percentage of gay, lesbian, and cross-dressing agents in the industry somewhere near twenty percent.¹⁶ Combined with the other ways in which the call center industry is understood as non-traditional—e.g. relaxed hierarchies and dress codes, a large and young workforce, overnight shifts, and emphasis on social bonding amongst co-workers—call center workers often experience the work culture as experimental and diverse. Diana, a woman from Bacolod City, described her eyes being opened to same-sex relationships as well as casual opposite-sex relationships—neither of which she had been exposed to in Bacolod but which seemed routine when she began working in a call center in Manila.¹⁷ “In Manila,” Diana explains, “it’s a lot more open ... There would be girls who look like boys and boys that look like girls, but with same-sex partners. And you can’t tell ... that they are the same [gender].” For others, the openness of the industry was much more personally meaningful. In one of my many conversations with Sammy—a young man whose goals were to have M-F [male to female] gender reassignment surgery and a career in professional modeling—he explained the reasons that he left the medical field and started working in a call center, despite being trained as a nurse and having parents who were both doctors. “Working in a hospital, there are so many formalities and restrictions,” Sammy explained. “Like in

¹⁶ Regina Hechanova-Alampay and Edna P. Franco (eds), *The Way We Work: Research and Best Practices in Philippine Organizations* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2005).

¹⁷ The cultural contrast between Bacolod, a conservative, mid-sized city in the central region of the country, and Manila, the nation’s capital, cannot be understated. As I discuss in my book project, the difference in these urban environments makes for differing experiences amongst workers from these cities, even as the cities are understood by the Philippine state and BPO industry leaders as connected through “corridors” of information technology.

how you have to address people, and how you can have your hair. In a hospital your hair must be short, but I want my long hair. [*Throwing his head back.*] Nursing changed me. They wanted me to be professional, but it wasn't open. But I like it here [in this call center]. It's so *me*. I can be open. Sometimes being a professional and being open don't match, but here [in call centers], yes, they do."

Thus, by "queering the call center" I point not only to the putative presence of gender and sexual non-conforming workers, but the social and cultural process through which call centers and call center workers in the Philippines are perceived as sites for the exploration and expression of sexual/gender identities and practices that fall outside the boundaries of normative sexual behavior prescribed for Filipinos by the institutions of the family, the state, and the Catholic Church. As Gene, the head of human resources at a global call center in the Philippines, described it, "When your hiring requirements allow a very diverse set of new employees, well, I would say you have a variety of ... sexual orientations or preferences, which run from the right to the left ... You put together a very young workforce, hormones kicking at night, you just have the right formula for building a nuclear bomb." We need only consider the Church's condemnation of all non-procreative sex to begin to understand the nature of the "bomb" Gene speaks of. Indeed, premarital, non-procreative sex is merely one aspect of what the Catholic Church in the Philippines sees as a "culture of DEATH" threatening the sanctity of the Filipino family, in which "death" is an acronym that denotes divorce, euthanasia, abortion, transexuality and homosexuality. Thus we might read Ryan's plea for the public to suspend their judgment of call center agents

hanging around Ortigas as pointing not only to the visibility of sexualized, queer, or otherwise non-normative bodies within urban space—and thus their vulnerability to censure—but to an expansive discourse of call centers as sites of social and sexual transgression. Ryan’s formidable attempts to obscure his own body underscore the context and thus significance of his plea.

Disconnecting Disease and Identity

Given the previously circulating discourses about call centers, sexuality, and Filipino youth, we can understand the 2010 reports of the increase in HIV cases amongst call center workers as amplifying and reinforcing a number of concerns about the industry and those employed by it, especially fears that call centers are dens of vice, sexual transgression, and now disease. Adding to the epistemological crisis was the absence of a concrete public discussion of the physical contact that leads to transmission of HIV, a knowledge gap unsurprising in a country where Catholic bishops routinely disapprove of non-reproductive sex education and thus where detailed and accurate information about HIV transmission does not seem to circulate widely.¹⁸ Instead, public health officials, doctors, journalists, and researchers linked HIV transmission amongst call center workers to the latter’s “unhealthy lifestyles,” with which they include “risky sexual behavior” but also smoking, drinking

¹⁸ A more recent article, entitled “Gay sex fuels HIV rise in Catholic Philippines,” underscores this point well, both by reporting on how the conservative message of the Catholic church thwarts condom use in the country and, ironically, through the use of a vague term—“gay sex”—in the article’s title. See Jason Gutierrez, abs-cbnNEWS.com, July 26, 2012, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/-depth/07/26/12/gay-sex-fuels-hiv-rise-catholic-philippines>. The historic passage of RA 10354, or the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Act of 2012 may, however, change this situation. Indeed, writing earlier versions of this essay while watching Filipinos push for the RA 10354 in 2012 has compelled me to think about how we might understand the sexual culture of call center workers in relation to larger discourse of reproductive rights and health in the country.

alcohol, and not getting enough sleep.¹⁹ ABS-CBN also reported that “some of those infected said they got the illness after engaging in casual or group sex, which they discovered through social networking sites on the Internet.” Quoting “a doctor,” the same report states that “There are a lot of sites right now that can organize orgies quickly. A lot of young people believe in casual sex.”²⁰

Comments on the Joseph Ryan video, although not many, more than underscore the strength and persistence of these misperceptions, as well as the public’s vitriol. Over a year later, “mrlarenjan” wrote “Fuck off! *basta may AIDS ka, dahil katangahan at kalandian mo kaya ganyan!!!!* [Fuck off! If you have AIDS, it’s because of stupidity and promiscuity!!!!]. Around the same time, “Nemesis 1112” expressed skepticism of Ryan’s story and spoke explicitly about his/her beliefs about Filipino call center workers:

how did he know *na dun sa nurse n naka-sex nya nanggaling yun aids nya? namatay nb sa aids yung nurse? o sinabi n sa kanya n me aids cya ? naku kailangan msagot yang tanung ko n yan or else ang stigma sa mga call agents ay ganun p rin sa isipan ko...*

[how did he know that the nurse he had sexual relations with was the source of his HIV/AIDS? Did that nurse already die of AIDS? Or did that nurse inform him that he has AIDS? These questions need to be answered or else I won’t change my mind about the stigma about call center agents ...]

Ryan’s monologue can be read in relation to these proliferating perceptions of the social identities of call center workers as well as the vague information disseminated about how one contracts HIV. As the media and medical reports suggest, the cultural

¹⁹ Rey M. Nasol, “Steady rise in HIV cases noted in the Philippines,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 2, 2010.

²⁰ “HIV cases soar.”

construction of call center workers as a possible new high-risk category hinged on associations of the transmission of disease with social and sexual transgression in general, rather than unprotected sex in particular. In such reports, call center workers' risk for contracting HIV/AIDS is continuously linked to having multiple sexual partners, having sex in the absence of romantic commitment, non-sexual vices such as drinking and smoking—even “inadequate sleep.” When “unsafe sex” is mentioned as a possible risk factor, it is never clearly defined. Nowhere in the picture of workers rushing to have “orgies” does the ABS-CBN article refer to protected or unprotected sex—at least not until the very end of the article, where the phrase “unsafe sex” is left hanging and thus free to describe “orgies” and “casual sex,” rather than sex without a condom or other prophylactic device.

Call center workers and industry leaders' most immediate response to the news was not to emphasize the physical contact that leads to HIV transmission but to articulate a counter discourse asserting that working in a call center has absolutely no relation to acquiring or being at risk for HIV. An ABS-CBN journalist, reporting on an interview with an HIV-positive call center agent using the pseudonym “Humphrey,” exemplified this approach, saying “[Call center] work has no correlation to acquiring HIV... [Humphrey says] his line of work has nothing to do with his getting infected.”²¹ By swinging the pendulum in the other direction, such claims clearly miss the mark with regards to HIV prevention, even as they create

²¹ ABS-CBN News, “Lifestyle, Not Job, Increases HIV Risk, Says Agent,” YouTube.com, January 29, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClJyBFt5EM>.

distance between the perception of HIV risk and the call center industry. However, Ryan's public address differs from these other accounts by distinguishing call center agents' identities as workers from their sexual practices and sexual identities. Indeed, Ryan makes clear that he acquired HIV by having unsafe, unprotected sex, although he too stops short of explicitly defining the terms "safe" or "protected." Furthermore, by not stating the gender of the person or persons with whom he had unprotected sex, Ryan avoids any association between his acquisition of HIV, sexual activity, and sexual identity. Describing the "someone" he met at a street party, Ryan explains that "*this* person is not from a call center" and that "*this* person works in a hospital." Thus Ryan's use of gender-neutral language achieves three distancing acts: HIV/AIDS from sexual identity, non-normative sexual identity from call centers, and his own identity from sexual object choice.

Thus we arrive at another major thread to which Joseph Ryan's testimony speaks: the complex process of signification unfolding around the questions of call center workers' HIV risk. The latter points to the way that, as Paula Treichler has argued, "the AIDS epidemic has produced a parallel epidemic of meanings, definitions, and attributions," which she refers to as an "epidemic of signification."²²

²² In other words, the multiple ways in which HIV/AIDS has been understood and represented shapes the very identity of the disease and, thus, who we think is at risk for contracting it. For critical medical anthropologists, a person or a group's supposed

²² Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

risk for contracting the virus is an “arena of contestation” that cannot be reduced to or explained using epidemiological data alone, because the perception that a particular group is at high risk for HIV/AIDS is shaped by cultural and social factors that exceed the epidemiological.²³

(Trans)National Spaces of Affect and Abjection

Although Ryan’s testimony opens up the possibility of understanding HIV transmission in ways that demystify non-normative Filipino bodies, it toes the line between an interest in warning his viewers about the perils of unsafe sex and a desire to clear the call center industry of its sexualized stigma. The latter suggests Ryan’s alignment with a state- and industry-based discourse that endorses the Philippines’ aspiration for connection to global capital. For state and industry leaders alike, the nation’s rise to the top of the global customer service chain has made call centers the nation’s “sunrise industry;” 1-800 numbers, it seems, will connect the Philippines to a modern future built on information technology and back-office service work for Anglo-European and US corporations. We can contrast this understanding of the call center industry with a critical postcolonial perspective that understands outsourcing as part of a history of US racialized, gendered, and sexualized exploitation of Filipino laboring bodies that stretches back to the turn of the twentieth century.

²³ Naomi Glick Schiller, “What’s Wrong with This Picture? The Hegemonic Construction of Culture in AIDS Research in United States,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series, 6(3) (September 1992): 237-254.

By using his confession to remind listeners of the economic contributions of call center workers, Ryan addresses these national and transnational predicaments through his affect in particular. Ryan expresses shame and dishonor, literally cries out to parents, friends, co-workers, and “the public,” and issues an apology, yet he never makes clear what his anonymous apology is for. Instead, he contrasts his unhealthy and weakened body with that of the economic health of the nation that his labor helps secure, suggesting that the virus he carries, along with his “careless” actions, disgrace the nation as a whole. Indeed, the use of YouTube as a venue to disseminate his message, coupled with Ryan’s use of Taglish, suggest that despite the potential global reach of the Internet, the video is primarily for Filipino audiences. If we read the non-normativity of Ryan’s body and his sexual transgressions as that which is *other* to the nation, then his anonymity does not diminish the strength of the apology but reinforces it. Having transformed the confession into a space of abjection, Ryan then seeks the possibility of redemption by sermonizing on the economic strength of the global workforce of which he is a part—and which he vows to rejoin once he regains his strength. While medical treatment serves as the lifeline for Ryan as an individual agent, US capital constitutes a lifeline for the Philippine economy. Ryan thus speaks as if Filipino transnational labor for US corporations were not the contemporary expression of a colonial legacy that has long cast exploited Filipino bodies as the nation’s *other*.

I wish to further unpack these ideas by considering the spaces and places that Ryan links to the sexual activity that led to his contraction of HIV. Ryan first

explains that he acquired the virus from someone he met at a party in Quezon City, not at work, and that the person is not a call center agent but someone who works at a hospital in Bulacan, a province outside of Manila. Ryan's mapping thus figuratively distances the person from whom he acquired HIV from the epicenter of the Philippine call center industry—a configuration consistent with his desire to distance HIV risk from call center work and to locate it in unprotected sex. Ryan's mapping of his sexual activity also mirrors that of Humphrey's. In the interview with ABS-CBN, Humphrey explains that, “the activities that would give me the virus ... is personal activities [*sic*] ... I do them outside work, outside the house, I do them ... on my personal time”—that is, not his time spent in sleeping quarters or behind other closed doors at the call center where he works.

More strikingly, however, Ryan locates the unsafe sex and the virus with a hospital worker and, thus, in the medical field. This detail of Ryan's confession is especially meaningful when read through the locally and culturally constructed framework in which Filipino labor in medicine (especially nursing) is more highly valued than Filipino labor in outsourcing. The contrast between nursing labor and BPO labor is indeed salient amongst call center workers themselves, many of whom—like Sammy—struggle against familial and social expectations that they study nursing so as to acquire a job abroad. The call center industry, furthermore, is rife with agents who are would-be nurses either saving to afford expensive review classes for the nursing board exams or for tuition, a situation that brings the contrast between industries into sharp relief. By reminding his viewers that people employed

by hospitals can also be carriers of HIV, Ryan seems to challenge the superlative value attached to nursing work. Lastly, his insistence on the huge contributions call center workers make to the Philippine national economy serves to address another sector of the Philippine workforce: those who work not for Euro-American corporations or take up medicine to go abroad but, as some interviewees describe it, who “choose to work for their country.” In this way, Ryan responds to a discourse in which call center work is criticized as anti-nationalist and a barrier to true national development.

Given these attempts to figuratively locate and contain call center workers’ HIV risk, it is striking that the most recent comments on YouTube—by “Rico Dioquino”—simply list numerous places where call centers are located in the Philippines, the kinds of social venues call centers workers attend, and a seemingly random insertion of the terms *bakla*, *tomboy*, and *sihalis* (gay, lesbian, bisexual)—as if to point to the threat of queer call center agents as everywhere and thus uncontainable.²⁴

All in the Family

²⁴ The comments read as follows: Rico Dioquino, 2 months ago: *call centers in ortigas -greenhills makati ayala alabang marikina banks metro east cainta taytay antipolo rizal laguna cavite pasig cubao fort eaguig edsa shaw -libis and in cities and provinces and municipals and -las pinsa pulang lupa rhona ville munti and bamboo city las pinas city munti_ and from cogeo village bagong nayan anfd bulacan province etc-a bex /ay bex -ay vex a vex /companies etc [sic]; Rico Dioquino, 4 months ago: *isang yan bakla or tomboy or silahis from call centers*; Rico Dioquino, 4 months ago: *thats call centers or call_center agents employees employers workers from bulacan or somewhere in provinces or paties celebrations anniversaries birthdays occassions political or ordinary or some pilipino artists hosts actors actress singers broadcasters shooting or taping or studio contestants or radio or tv contestants in Philippines [sic].**

The sexualization and queering of the Philippine call center industry, together with an ideological belief in globalization as the country's path to modernity, suggest that Joseph Ryan's confession/apology is about much more than revealing his HIV-positive status. Indeed, Ryan seems to speak through and to the contradiction of being both an agent of Philippine modernity and the literal embodiment of what is thought to be the BPO industry's disorder and disease. However, the affective purchase of the testimony—the sense that Ryan has somehow failed the nation as a whole—is underwritten by an erasure of the postcolonial tensions inherent in the fantasy of Philippine globalization. In other words, in claiming to work for and then confessing to letting down his country, Ryan avoids confrontation with a colonial past that has relegated Filipinos to service work for US and European companies that rely on the Philippines as a source of low-cost, flexible labor. The ultimately non-radical register of the confession is reinforced by the fact that AKMA-PTM, the organization that posted Ryan's video, merely seeks to “improve the Philippine call center industry and to make the country more conducive to [BPOs],” rather than to protect call center workers' rights through unionization or engage in anti-globalization movements.²⁵

By way of conclusion, I offer a final reading of the Joseph Ryan confession as evoking and forging familial bonds between call center workers, something I discuss at greater length in my other work on this subject. In Ryan's message, he specifically lists “teammates” alongside parents and friends as the target of his pathos and regret,

²⁵ “Call center group launches HIV hotline,” *People's Tonight*, March 2, 2010.

while he links his description of rejoining the workforce to becoming, once again, an economically viable member of his family. Ryan thus constructs a continuum between his cultivation of familial relationships at home and at work, relationships that he sees as ruptured by his transgressions and repaired by his medical treatment. Coupled with the desire to distance HIV risk from the call center industry, the discourse of the family as the site for redemption and healing suggests that the call center family—workers with affective ties to one another—absorbs and resolves the nationalist anxieties regarding the contradiction of an industry that produces profit and so-called perversity. Ryan's confession thus succeeds in absolving the call center industry and the Philippine state from connections to queer identities and the supposed problems these identities entail—an act that secures the image of the call center industry as the nation's savior.

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