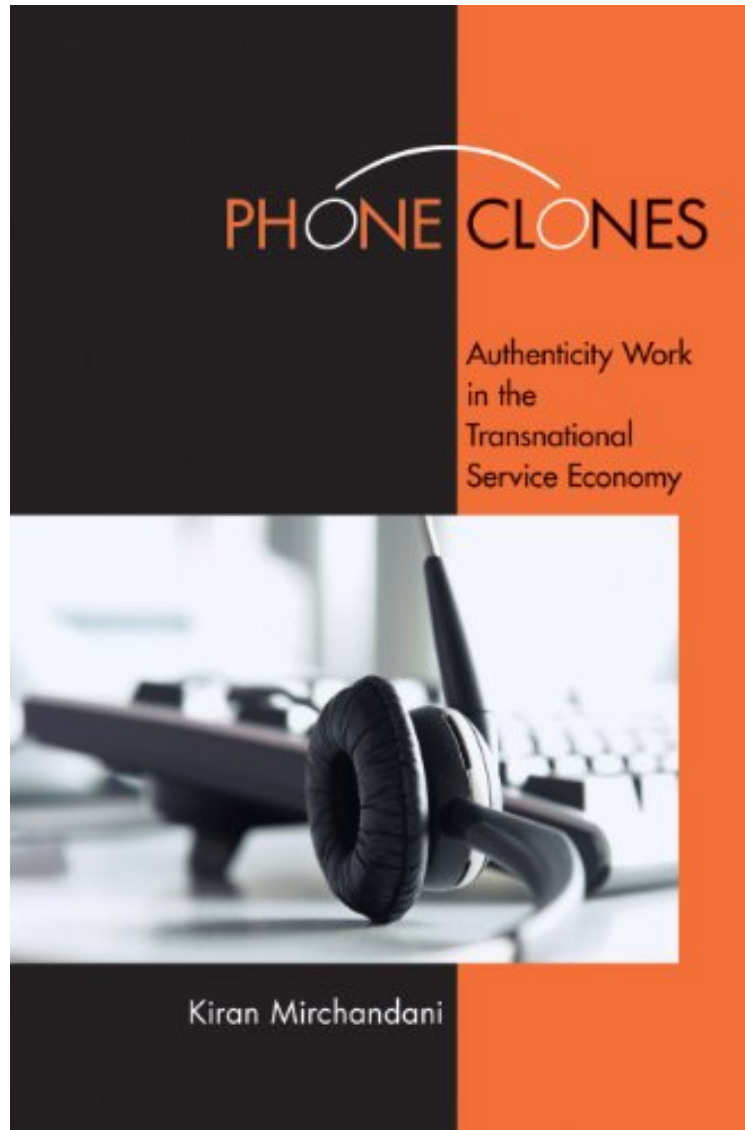


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# Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy

*Kiran Mirchandani*

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**Kiran Mirchandani : Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy:

Transnational customer service workers are an emerging touchstone of globalization given their location at the

intersecting borders of identity, class, nation, and production. Unlike outsourced manufacturing jobs, call center work requires voice-to-voice conversation with distant customers; part of the product being exchanged in these interactions is a responsive, caring, connected self. In *Phone Clones*, Kiran Mirchandani explores the experiences of the men and women who work in Indian call centers through one hundred interviews with workers in Bangalore, Delhi, and Pune. As capital crosses national borders, colonial histories and racial hierarchies become inextricably intertwined. As a result, call center workers in India need to imagine themselves in the eyes of their Western clients—to represent themselves both as foreign workers who do not threaten Western jobs and as being "just like" their customers in the West. In order to become these imagined ideal workers, they must be believable and authentic in their emulation of this ideal. In conversation with Western clients, Indian customer service agents proclaim their legitimacy, an effort Mirchandani calls "authenticity work," which involves establishing familiarity in light of expectations of difference. In their daily interactions with customers, managers and trainers, Indian call center workers reflect and reenact a complex interplay of colonial histories, gender practices, class relations, and national interests.

"*Phone Clones* is, overall, a delight to read. It draws from a refreshing compilation of ethnographic materials, such as scribbles from workers' notes in training sessions, which are quite revealing of their internalization and resistance against the authenticity project. Mirchandani interweaves perspectives from diverse fields and intellectual traditions, engaging both theoretical and empirical sources, to provide a captivating adventure for the audience. This book will be valuable for the classroom, for scholarly research, and for the joy of reading."—Winifred R. Poster, ILR (October 2012)

"*Phone Clones* is an exhaustive overview of the outsourcing of call center work to India—perhaps the most high-profile aspect of the global trade in services. Kiran Mirchandani has spent a lot of time examining the issue and we are the beneficiaries: the emergent space of outsourced work is both bizarre (hybrid accents and identities) and strangely mundane (routinized work). Mirchandani avoids the pitfalls of blind enthusiasm and knee-jerk skepticism. Her nuanced account is marked by her eye for cultural subtleties, which are not secondary to economic concerns but rather tied up in them."—Shehzad Nadeem, Lehman College, City University of New York, author of *Dead Ringers*

"This fascinating book illuminates cultural cloning through transnational adaptations of race, class, and gender exploitation. Imitating Western voices and values, Indian workers are caught in a skillful, but dehumanizing, interplay between authenticity and fake. Once you have read the chilling stories behind the making of phone clones you will never experience call service centers the same as before."—Philomena Essed, Antioch University, author of *Understanding Everyday Racism*

"*Phone Clones* shows us how we can learn from the labor of Indian call center workers about the politics of globalization. It offers an astute and compelling analysis of this labor as 'authenticity work' including the effort required to 'sound right' to calling customers (sometimes by minimizing the sounds of difference), to respond to racism or abuse with empathy, or even to become the right kind of foreign workers who do not take Western jobs. Authenticity work, we learn, is a slippery terrain, requiring constant negotiation of familiarity and difference. Based on extensive interviews, this book lends us an ear, so that we can hear the voices of the workers themselves. And in attending to what is often hidden labor, this book offers an urgent and necessary critique of the micropolitics of transnational service economies."—Sara Ahmed, University of London, author of *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*

"The transnational call centers in India are ideal sites to interrogate the continuous negotiation of national borders by the workers to act authentically, which in turn acts as the norm on the basis of which their inclusion/exclusion can occur and yet it is required that they be simultaneously similar as well as different from their customers in the West. They become what Kiran Mirchandani, in her enviable style, calls 'phone clones.' The author argues that the actual interactions at Indian call centers are structured by highly localized histories within the context of colonial past, state policies, class structures, and transnational capital flows that dare not question Western supremacy. A must-read by those interested in transnational labor flows and relations; global spaces, and unequal exchanges, *Phone Clones* opens up a critical gaze at a phenomenon that has been touted as one of the success stories of shining India for long."—Saraswati Raju, Jawaharlal Nehru University

"Kiran Mirchandani is the indisputable leader in the field of work identities and transnational call centers in India. She provides one of the first in-depth, ethnographic studies of the Indian call center industry that is both multi-sited and longitudinal, as well one of the first rigorous analyses of the many fascinating issues surrounding identity. *Phone Clones* goes beyond the surface story in the popular press and mainstream academic work about Indian call centers, and the euphoria about cost-savings, social uplifting, and creating a 'flat world' as Thomas Friedman argues. It uncovers the more insidious side of the call center work experience—control of emotion, time, race, gender, and nation. It presents an insightful analysis that recognizes power structures in the labor process, as well as how they are transformed."—Winifred R. Poster, Washington University, St. Louis

About the Author Kiran Mirchandani is Associate Professor in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. She is the coauthor of *Criminalizing Race, Criminalizing Poverty* and coeditor of *The Future of Lifelong Learning and Work*.