

PURPLE-COLLAR LABOR:

Transgender Workers and Queer Value at Global Call Centers in the Philippines

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This article examines new patterns of workplace inequality that emerge as transgender people are incorporated into the global labor market. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 41 transgender call center employees in the Philippines, I develop the concept “purple-collar labor” to describe how transgender workers—specifically trans women—are clustered, dispersed, and segregated in the workplace and how their patterned locations in social organizational structures serve a particular value-producing function. These patterned inclusions, I argue, come with explicit and implicit interactional expectations about how “trans” should be put to work in the expansion and accumulation of global capital. In this way, the study examines the production and extraction of queer value and the folding of trans women’s gendered performances into commercial exchange. Data show how the affective labor of transgender employees is used to help foster productivity, ease workplace tensions, and boost employee morale. This study of transgender employment experiences opens new lines of inquiry for understanding gender inequalities at work, and it builds on scholarship that combines political economy approaches with transgender studies.

Keywords: *transgender; purple collar; queer value; outsourcing; Philippines*

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A growing body of scholarship has begun to document transgender employment experiences (Bender-Baird 2011; Grant, Mottet, and Tanis 2011; Schilt 2006, 2010; Schilt and Connell 2007; Schilt and Wiswall 2008; Westbrook and Schilt 2014). While some transgender subjects refrain from disclosing their trans status out of social, political, or economic necessity (Connell 2010), many now identify publicly as transgender in the workplace, in part because of state and corporate non-discrimination policies. As transgender people become more integrated across labor markets, their employment as transgender subjects creates the conditions for new kinds of workplace inequalities.

These emergent workplace arrangements can be discussed using the concept of “purple-collar labor.”¹ The purple collar provides a theoretical frame for understanding transgender subjects’ institutional and interactional incorporation into workplace relations. Of course, trans- and gender-variant people have always sought paid employment, and they have routinely performed unpaid labor and emotional work (R. Connell 2012; Green 2006; Namaste 2009; Nordmarken 2014). But as transgender becomes institutionalized, trans-specific occupational roles, relations, and expectations seem to be emerging. A focus on transgender workplace experiences raises important empirical questions about occupational gender segregation that are often difficult to address with existing concepts and methodological approaches based on cisgender (non-transgender) experiences or on the gender ratios in specific fields and occupations.² The purple-collar concept takes as its starting point various patterns of transgender workplace incorporation, which can theoretically “trans”, move across, or take shape in white-collar, blue-collar, and pink-collar professions.

Extending Dan Irving’s research on the nexus between political economy and critical transgender studies (2008a, 2008b, 2012), this study examines trans-incorporation in a twenty-first-century globalized workplace. It investigates nascent interactional gender relations and structural arrangements within “neo-liberal regimes of wealth accumulation” that are “amenable to incorporating marginal and minority segments of the population, such as trans people, into their corporate structures as employees” (Irving 2008a, 113). This incorporation accompanies recent changes in corporate cultures. As Avery Gordon argues with respect to “diversity management,” the social forms of corporations are being “reinvented by design,” with vertical authority structures being replaced by “a decentered flexible form which is capable of managing that which produces ‘high value,’ namely its intellectual capital, its skilled personnel” (Gordon 1995, 5).

In this study, I develop the purple-collar concept by focusing on experiences of transgender women employed as call center workers in the Philippines. In the first section, I introduce the purple-collar concept as analogous to blue-collar and pink-collar work, and I describe its structural and interactional underpinnings. In the second section, I use a global “crosscurrents” framework to show how gender and sexual categories can change when used in different contexts. Then, after discussing my research methods, I use empirical data to illustrate purple-collar dynamics in the call center workplace. My data show how trans-workers, specifically transgender women, are inserted into the logics of production, resulting in new forms of occupational integration and segregation based on transgender status. These patterns of transgender clustering, dispersal, and segregation, I argue, come with explicit and implicit interactional expectations about how “trans” should be put to work as a productive activity. Data show that transgender women workers must operate within increasingly narrow gender expectations that further stratify social actors. By investigating these phenomena empirically, this project responds to calls for feminist social science to develop more nuanced accounts of trans politics and, in particular, trans workplace experiences (R. Connell 2012; Namaste 2004, 2009).

PURPLE IS THE NEW PINK: GENDER, WORK, AND ORGANIZATIONS

Since feminist scholars first identified the “pink-collar ghetto” that arises from women’s occupational gender segregation (Howe 1977; Stallard, Ehrenreich, and Sklar 1983, 18), a wide body of research has investigated the persistence of gender inequalities at work. Researchers have found that women and men are often concentrated in different industries, or clustered hierarchically when employed in the same industry (Kessler-Harris 2003). These employment patterns have been described with the concepts of white-collar, blue-collar, and pink-collar work. White-collar occupations are associated with professional work, high pay, and relative autonomy. Blue-collar occupations, which include trade or manufacturing jobs characterized by low pay, physical labor, and, at some points in history, union organizing, are typically male-dominated. Service-oriented occupations, on the other hand, are often described using the pink-collar metaphor (Howe 1977), because they have high concentrations of women, many of whom receive low pay, perform emotional labor, and contend with flexible work schedules.

Across the employment pyramid, women tend to be clustered in positions with shorter occupational ladders, thus reflecting gender gaps in promotion and career growth (Bose and Whaley 2001). These workplace arrangements can change over time. For example, when women enter fields dominated by men, it is often because technological advances have downgraded the required skill sets, leading men to exit these fields because of lower wages and decreased prestige (Bose and Whaley 2001). Furthermore, Acker (1990) argues that gender hierarchies are embedded in the logic of traditional organizations. In the decades since Acker's (1990) theory was first developed, the "social organization of work has changed considerably"; the gendered organizational logics respond to changes that occur in the "new economy," in which "work is precarious, teams instead of managers control the labor process, career maps replace career ladders, and future opportunities are identified primarily through networking" (Williams, Muller, and Kilanski 2012, 551). These transformations, it is worth noting, take place in tandem with expansions of gender definitions and proliferations of named gender categories that, since the 1990s, have emerged along with transgender movements.

These profound shifts require new conceptual tools. In this study, I employ the concept "purple-collar labor" to refer to structural and interactional conditions experienced by transgender women workers in the labor market. Structurally, the concept refers to transgender workers' spatial location in particular work sites. The purple-collar workforce can be both densely clustered in a particular industry and systematically dispersed, vertically and/or horizontally, within particular workplaces. Interactionally, the purple-collar concept theorizes how transgender women employees' micro-interactional work is characterized by specific systems of rewards, responsibilities, and penalties.

The purple collar takes account of the culturally and historically specific ways in which "doing transgender" (Connell 2010) can be put to work in the expansion and accumulation of global capital. My argument draws on what Meg Wesling (2012, 108) calls "queer value," which describes "labored economies of sexuality and gender" in which the interactional "performance of sexuality and gender constitutes a form of labor, accruing both material and affective value." For Wesling, the "compulsory repetition of gender as performance" is made valuable when the "gendered subject submits 'freely' to the imperative of this continual labor, and regards the product of that labor—gender identity—not as an imposition from outside but as something that originates from within" (Wesling 2012, 109). Affect, then, like Hochschild's (1983) theories of

“emotional labor,” is central to queer value and to purple-collar labor, because it is “the realm of affect that renders such performances to seem . . . spontaneous” (Wesling 2012, 109). As such, this affective labor “accrues value for capitalism without monetary remuneration for the individual laborer” (Wesling 2012, 109).

Drawing on data from interviews with transgender call center agents in the Philippines, this article examines the folding of transgender performances into commercial exchange. It extends scholarship on gender, work, and organizations by identifying patterns of transgender incorporation into the global labor market. The purple collar is at work when transgender women employees become clustered, separated, or segregated on the job; their location in the social organizational structure, and the accompanying interactions, serve a particular value-producing function. While my claims are grounded primarily in the experiences of trans women workers, the core features of the purple-collar concept should remain flexible enough to be used in future research that compares continuities and/or discontinuities in patterns of trans men’s incorporation into, or exclusion from, specific work contexts.

TRANS-ING THE GLOBAL “CROSSCURRENTS” OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Following Susan Stryker (2008, 1), I use “transgender” to refer to those who “move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.” Stryker’s focus on movement rather than end points (such as “before and after” transitions) is useful because my respondents in the Philippines are located at the confluence of multiple systems of gender and sexual categorization. Given the postcolonial layering of language and knowledge production in a Philippine context, treating “transgender” as a static category would be highly problematic; with the globalization of transgender movements, some Filipino subjects now self-identify as “transgender,” while others refer to themselves (or are described by others) as “gay” or use Filipino terms for gender-sexual subjectivities, such as *bakla* (in Tagalog) or *bayot* (in Cebuano) (Garcia 2009; Tan 1995).

Whereas contemporary, Western-centric models of gay male identity emphasize gender conformity over gender transgression, the Filipino category *bakla* makes no clear-cut distinction between gender and sexuality.

Martin Manalansan (2003, 24-25) writes that “bakla conflates the categories of effeminacy, transvestism, and homosexuality and can mean one or all of these in different contexts,” but, he continues, “the main focus of the term is that of effeminate mannerism, feminine physical characteristics . . . , and cross dressing.” While some Filipinos translate *bakla* with the word “gay,” an exact English equivalent does not exist. As J. Neil Garcia argues, there exist “points of nonequivalence” between the Western homosexual and Filipino *bakla*, which “[belong] to two different knowledge systems” and are “irrevocably different from each other” (Garcia 2009, xxi-xxii).

In the past decade, many Filipinos have begun to use “gay” and “transgender” to distinguish between sexuality and gender and to create distance from the *bakla* category.³ These categories have been refined further with new hybrid terms. “Transpinay” (*pinay* means “Filipina woman”) was coined in 2008 by the Society of Transsexual Women of the Philippines to name transgender or transsexual Filipinas. “Transpinoy” (*pinoy* means “Filipino man”), an alternative to “tomboy” categories (a common designation for Filipino female masculinity), has been adopted by emergent groups such as the Association of Transgender Men of the Philippines and Pinoy FTM (an offshoot of FTM International). These emergent distinctions among gay, *bakla*, and trans are complicated by socioeconomic class. Bobby Benedicto (2008, 294) documents affluent gay Filipino men’s repudiation of the effeminacy of low-income *bakla*, who provide a “crucial foil against which a position of privilege is established.”⁴ Similarly, upwardly mobile gender-variant Filipinas are beginning to adopt “transgender” or “transpinay” to distance themselves from *bakla*, whose “longstanding association with beauty and transformation has meant that they are traditionally employed as hairstylists, beauticians, designers, entertainers, and wedding planners” (Thoreson 2011, 499). This association arises, in part, from limited occupational opportunities for transgender Filipinas. Researchers who administered a questionnaire to a convenience sample of 147 transgender Filipina women found that, of the respondents who reported regular employment, 65 percent were working in the entertainment sector as performers, dancers, or sex workers; and 21.5 percent were employed in the beauty and fashion sectors, mostly as hairdressers, beauticians, and make-up artists (Winter, Rogando-Sasot, and King 2007, 83). The researchers conclude that these patterns are “suggestive of an occupational ghetto” (Winter, Rogando-Sasot, and King 2007, 87). More conceptual specificity could be added; these employment patterns suggest a “purple-collar ghetto.”

Faced with these categorical instabilities, I use the term “transgender” with some hesitation.⁵ I employ the term within Kale Fajardo’s “crosscurrents” framework, which aims “not to transport the terms *queer* or *transgender* to the Philippines in a ‘Western,’ U.S. American, or global north colonial or imperialist manner but to emphasize the transnational, trans-Pacific, and transport connections and cultural flows between the Philippines and regional, and diasporic, geographies” (Fajardo 2008, 407). Fajardo shows how the “coconstitutive axes of identity (race, class, gender, sexuality) potentially or regularly get reconfigured through movement, travel, and migration” (Fajardo 2014, 117). Crosscurrents factor into my analysis, because global call center agents are, in many ways, “virtual migrants” who “migrate without migration” (Aneesh 2006, 2). As such, the convergences of trans, gay, *bakla*, and other categories must be considered within the crosscurrents framework, because trans-ness takes shape in this occupational context alongside and against Western and local identity categories.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

Over the past decade, there has been a rapid rise in the number of call centers in the Philippines. In 2001, the Philippines had only 2,000 call center employees (Hechanova-Alampay 2010). By 2010, there were 400,000 call center workers (Bajaj 2011), who make up the largest subset of the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry, which includes voice and non-voice workers. The Philippines’ BPO industry is expanding, employing 700,000 in 2013; some project that the number of BPO positions will surpass 1.3 million by 2016 (IBPAP 2011). Outsourced work generates impressive amounts of revenue. Coupled with the information technology sector, the BPO industry in the Philippines generated \$11 billion in 2011, up from \$350 million in 2001; industry associations have set a goal of \$25 billion for 2016 (Balana 2010; IBPAP 2011). This growth is partially indebted to state and industry brokerage of Filipino labor, which involves training workers and deploying nationalist ideologies of call center agents as *bagong bayani* or “new national heroes” (David, forthcoming).

Transnational corporations use global outsourcing to maximize profits. While some call center agents in the Philippines make more than double the country’s minimum wage, they earn significantly less than their U.S. counterparts (IBON 2003). A 2005 study found that professionals performing outsourced work in the Philippines earn 13 percent of the wages

of similar workers in the United States; only the salaries of Indian workers are lower, at 12 percent (Beshouri, Farrell, and Umezawa 2005). These wage disparities help explain why hundreds of thousands of call center jobs in the United States have been lost since 1999 to India and the Philippines (Friginal 2007). Some companies have elected to pay slightly more for Philippine labor because of a preference for U.S. English over British English (Bajaj 2011).

While some scholars frame workers in the global outsourcing industry as the “white collar proletariat” (Nadeem 2011), others focus on the gender-specificity of these “pink-collar” workforces (Freeman 2000). Global call centers are gendered worksites that reflect labor market trends. For example, in a 2007 survey of 2,500 call centers in 17 countries, researchers estimate that “seventy-one percent of the call center workforce is female” (Holman, Batt, and Holtgrewe 2007). Gender segregation at BPO sites in the Philippines is less pronounced, and census data suggest a relatively gender-integrated industry: women workers comprise 52.5 percent of the total BPO workforce. However, more women are employed in certain subfields (including call center activities, medical transcription, and data processing) that receive lower pay than subfields dominated by men, such as software publishing and web design (National Statistics Office, Gender and Development Committee 2009).

Based on Philippine census data, it is impossible to quantify transgender BPO employment. Nonetheless, insights can be gleaned from interview data. An examination of transgender Filipino employees further illuminates the gendered dimensions of global outsourcing and the feminization of the service and care industries (Patel 2010; Vijayakumar 2013). As such, the purple collar, in this context and at this historical moment, is more pink than blue.

METHODS

This article is part of a project on transgender employment in the BPO industry in the Philippines. My qualitative data are drawn from three extended research trips to the Philippines between 2009 and 2012. I drew on formal and informal social networks to recruit interviewees through a snowball sampling technique. Forty-one interviews were conducted with transgender Filipino BPO workers, 39 with trans women and two with trans men. With the exception of one interviewee who was assigned male at birth and self-identifies as a woman, but whose gender

expression is masculine, all interviewees have gender expressions that differ from the sex assigned to them at birth. My interview sample is skewed in the direction of trans women's experiences, a clear limitation. I attribute this asymmetry to several factors: first, at the time of my research, trans women's organizations were more institutionalized and politically visible than trans men's organizations; and second, my initial informants were trans women, and thus sampling unfolded through trans women's social networks. Given the uneven distribution of interviewees, I want to limit my claims to the experiences of trans women, though my thinking has been informed by interviews with trans men, who discussed their BPO experiences in the context of broader LGBT movements in the Philippines.

Throughout my research, power dynamics shaped interactions with participants. My racial hybridity as a Filipino-American helped bridge some relational distance with interviewees, especially in conversations about familial ties to the Philippines. However, my U.S. citizenship, mobility, occupation, and cisgender status were clear markers of difference. Not fluent in Tagalog or other Filipino languages, I conducted all interviews in English. For some respondents, this was an opportunity to showcase language skills deemed valuable and cosmopolitan in BPO settings. For others, speaking English in interviews produced anxiety similar to that experienced during customer service calls. I suspect selection bias in my sample with respect to English language proficiency; aspiring or entry-level BPO workers still undergoing language training may have been less likely to participate.

The transgender employees interviewed are between 19 and 35 years old, with an average age of 27. Twenty-eight of these interviewees hold college degrees: associate's degree (four), bachelor's degree (23), master's degree (one). Each of the remaining 13 respondents completed some college; many left school to pursue BPO work. Interviewees tended to avoid discussion of earnings, but I estimate that monthly pre-tax incomes ranged from 10,000 to 35,000 Philippine pesos per month (\$230 to \$810); most earned about 20,000 PHP (\$465). These are high wages in a country where nearly half of the population lives on less than \$60 a month (National Statistical Coordination Board 2009; Tyner 2009).

I also interviewed 28 cisgender people with ties to the BPO industry (agents, managers, consultants, and a call center owner) to learn more about their experiences of gender in these settings. In all, I interviewed 69 people. Most interviews took place in public settings rather than in the interviewees' places of employment. Interviews were digitally recorded

and transcribed in their entirety. I read the transcripts multiple times and identified emergent themes that were then coded using inductive techniques (Charmaz 2006).

TRANS-PRODUCTIONS OF QUEER VALUE

Transgender Clustering

One defining feature of the purple collar is the occupational segregation of transgender workers; it emerges when transgender employees are clustered in particular jobs, workplaces, or industries. The global outsourcing of service work has created a new employment niche for transgender Filipinos. In “Our Brave New World: A Brief History of the Birth of the Transgender Movement in the Philippines,” transpinay Sass Rogando-Sasot (2011) discusses the transgender community’s emergence in the Philippines, which took place at roughly the same time that global BPO companies began moving there. Rogando-Sasot (2011) describes the “half-opened doors of employment opportunities” provided to transgender Filipinos by these companies, which

gave transgender Filipinos another avenue to gain a living and build a career besides working in the entertainment, beauty, fashion, and sex industries. Because most of these companies have anti-discrimination policies they have been more willing to accept transgender employees. Hence there’s a considerable number of transgender Filipinos working in them. Nonetheless we still hear stories of transgender people being rejected because of being transgender.

In one of my interviews, a self-identified transpinoy, Jayson, echoed Rogando-Sasot’s account:

And the good thing about working in a BPO is, they respect each other. Most importantly, if you’re within the office, because in BPO there are a lot of gay people, a lot of lesbians, a lot of transgenders. A lot. That’s where you can see where your bosses are gay, supervisors are gay. . . . In a call center, because it’s usually an American-based company, an Australian-based company, they’re open like that. That really amazes me, to be honest with you.

An interview with Jenny, a trans woman call center worker, is particularly revealing of perceptions of an emergent purple-collar workforce:

Jenny: I think 75 percent in our office were really transgender women.

Interviewer: 75 percent? Three-fourths?

Jenny: Yeah, mostly.

Interviewer: Three out of four?

Jenny: I mean the whole company, not just our account.

Interviewer: That's really high.

Jenny: You haven't noticed?! [laughs] Maybe I might be wrong, but for me, it's something like that. Seventy-five percent of the people working in [one call center] were transgender people, transgender women. And you know, with this call center industry, it really provides really good employment and decent employment with transgender women, 'cause most of the lady boys might go to escort servicing or modeling, sex working.

While the ratio of transgender women at this interviewee's company may seem hyperbolic, her response is illuminating because she perceived transnational call centers as characterized by a particular kind of social organization: clustering of trans women. At the same time, she called this work not only "good" (i.e., relatively high-paying), but also a "decent" alternative to other low-status purple-collar sectors, particularly those that involve sex work. Class differences are implicit in Jenny's use of the term "lady boy" to describe transgender women employed in low-status work.

Jayson and Jenny were not alone in making such observations. In my fieldwork, I came across many others, including several cisgender informants, who noticed the clustering of gay, *bakla*, and transgender workers in the BPO industry. For instance, a cisgender Filipina woman, a call center supervisor, remarked, "We have males that do cross-dressing. We also have gay, which look like male, has male-male relationships. Actually, it's funny, because in my observation, you'll see different kinds of gay. We have a boy who dresses like a girl. They really look like a girl. They even look better than a girl." This supervisor's response emphasizes the (trans) gender variations within the category gay; she doesn't use the term "transgender" in her descriptions of workplace cross-dressing practices.

Another cisgender woman, a manager, told me, "Most men in call centers are gay [laughs]." I asked, "Why do you think that is?" She replied, "Because of the [call center] culture. We accept gay in this industry. They can pretend to be a girl during a call, so maybe they enjoy that." A third cisgender woman, a psychologist employed by BPO companies as a consultant to investigate emotional work conditions, mentioned in an email to me the high number of "third sex" call-center employees. When we met, I asked what she meant by "third sex." She responded, "This is just an observation. I asked them, 'Why do you want a call center job?' Let's say

they're . . . we call them *bakla*. They're males who are feminine. Then they said, 'Oh, because I can use a feminine voice.' They are doing that. It's like they create an avatar for themselves." The clustering of transgender and gender-nonconforming Filipinas, these observers reason, results from ideas about *how* transfemininities can be performed at work.

While some believe that BPO workplaces are, as one transgender informant puts it, a "safe space for LGBTs," other interviewees specified that not all call centers felt safe or hospitable. This perception led to a clustering in specific BPO companies, especially those with more lenient dress codes and policies that allow long hair. Alina, a trans woman, said, "Apparently the BPO industry is the only place we can work with less tension. But for that company [pointing across the street], it's quite scary. It's just very sad. Some of my friends who work there have to look manly. They have to wear guy wigs, with all their long hair hidden underneath. They wear something manly, stash their girly clothes inside their bag so when they finish their shift, they just change, somewhere, so they look girly again." Gina, also a trans woman, said, "One company requires transgenders to cut their hair, and for us, it's non-negotiable to cut our hair. Some transgenders would suck it up because they need a job and I guess they can't make it at other companies."

As Gina's statement reveals, some transgender Filipinas cannot be selective about their place of employment, which means complying with policies that required gender presentation to align with sex disclosed on identity documents. Janelle, a trans Filipina, worked for a company where "transgenders were very rare" because of such policies. Her daily routine included wearing a wig to work: "It's a short cut, so that I can hide my long hair. Those are the sacrifices that I did just to stay in that company. For a year and three months, every time I go to work, I need to wear my artificial hair." She purchased the wig at a mall and had it cut short, incurring added expenses. "I had it shaped at the barber shop. I asked to have it like a man's cut because I need to use it with my job," she said. Adding to the burden, she carried it incessantly: "It's always in my bag. My schedule was dawn shift, around 3 a.m. I need to wake up early, like an hour before my shift, at 2 a.m. I need to fix my hair so that no strands will be seen. I'm still wearing it until I get home." Describing this period of employment as "miserable," she transferred to a company with "a lot of transgenders."

Evidently unaware of these invisible forms of labor, a cisgender man employed as a team manager for an American computer company touted inclusion as evidence of non-discrimination:

There's really no gender issues, because we even hire transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens; *bakla* is our local term. There is a large population of gay people in this business, maybe because they can emulate the accent better, I'm not sure if that's even true. I think their propensity to be involved with the company is higher than, for the lack of a better term, straight people. They have discipline in terms of the work, because they have to save up money for their breast augmentation or anything to do with their physical bodies.

Invoking notions of mimicry, this interviewee speculated that trans workers' "emulating" skills draw them to call center work. Despite claiming that there were "no gender issues," he continued with a remark indicating that incorporation of difference was conditional: "But there are some companies who prohibit cross-dressing, like [international bank] for one." His coworker, another cisgender man who had joined us at a coffee shop just outside the call center, said, "There's some code of conduct for makeup and dress code." The team manager added, "It's okay that you're gay, as long as you don't wear ball gowns [laughter]!" Using "gay" for those on the trans-feminine spectrum, the cis-men's repudiation of femininity reflects what Julia Serano (2012, 172) calls "transmisogyny," which "specifically targets transgender expressions of femaleness and femininity."

Many of the trans women I interviewed expressed a keen awareness of subtle, sometimes unspoken, codes about gender expression. Mary Joy, a transsexual woman, described what she considered normal workplace attire:

Slacks for female. I wear like a blouse and then I have a coat or let's say a blazer. And I really look neat and I really look smart. Smart casual. It is a causal dress. It is really feminine, girly-girly. Though I have high heels, my make up is so light because it is morning. I need to do what's appropriate. Like ladies do.

In BPO workplaces that do not prohibit "cross-dressing," gendered dress codes still seem to exist; they prescribe appropriate makeup and "neat," feminine clothing compatible with professionalism.

Taken together, these interviews reveal that numerous observers perceive that transgender employees cluster at particular call center work-sites. Many believe that global outsourcing provides new work opportunities for transgender Filipinos. But inclusion seems to require particular gendered expressions and, in some cases, a repudiation of trans-femininities, which supports Rogando-Sasot's (2011) characterization of the outsourcing industry's "half-opened" doors.

Spatially Dispersed Interactional Work

The purple collar describes much more than the workplace concentration of transpeople; it can also refer to a patterned separation of transpeople from each other at particular worksites within an industry. In some cases, this reflects transgender “tokenism” (Schilt 2010), while in others it signals blocked upward mobility. For example, Angel, who describes herself as a “pre-op transsexual,” maps out the vertical occupational hierarchies in her workplace: “We have ten male supervisors and I’m the eleventh. I’m the only she-male.” Another informant, Rose Mae, a technical support manager who said she once called herself “she-male” but now refers to herself with a range of terms—transgender, gay, cross-dresser, and lady boy, the term used most frequently in her interview—described limited upward mobility:

When you reach a certain level in the management position role and you try to climb the corporate ladder, it’s gonna be really difficult. The air is getting thinner for you to breathe on. It’s getting thinner and thinner. The opportunities get lesser—that’s just my opinion. I don’t know about the rest of the lady boys. But for me, since I’ve been in this industry for almost nine years and I’ve been a manager for almost four years now, that’s how I feel.

She went on to describe interactional constraints for transgender women in higher-level positions, such as needing to “look strong” and “be firm with decisions.” She even avoided clothing choices that clashed with the corporate culture: “There are times I really want to wear a really short miniskirt in the office but I can’t because people would look at you in a different way.” She continued, “You feel the scrutinizing eyes of your subordinates.”

While several of my interviewees held senior positions, most were concentrated in entry-level or intermediate positions, especially as agents. Kimberly, a transgender interviewee, described the horizontal distribution of transgender women at one call center:

Kimberly: Every team has transgendered women—every team.

Interviewer: How many teams are there?

Kimberly: For morning shift, maybe around ten. Yeah, there are at least ten.

Yeah. We’re always scattered.

Interviewer: They don’t put you . . .

Kimberly: No. Because they know for a fact that what’s gonna happen is that we’re always gonna be on break. We’re just gonna be smoking. We’re just gonna be talking, chatting outside.

As Kimberly's interview continued, she gave a detailed picture of how managers separate trans women on the operations floor. At first glance, it might seem that managers were concerned that transgender workers would be less productive when together. But trans women's workplace isolation has another possible explanation: their presence on each team could also make teammates more productive. Finding evidence of this practice in other interviews, I realized that trans women are expected to serve as an important social lubricant within the team-centered corporate structures of outsourcing companies. The systematic dispersal of transgender employees is tied to their perceived workplace role, which often requires value-producing emotional labor. Illustrating this interactional work on call center teams, Kimberly said, "You keep them entertained so that they don't get bored. They don't realize the time is slower than it's supposed to be. They're complaining, 'What time is it? I just want to go home.' We keep them entertained." This micro-interactional work of "doing transgender" (Connell 2010) clearly produces queer value.

The purple-collar labor of being upbeat translates in many cases to increased social standing among peers, as their cheerful mood cuts through the nightshift's drudgery and helps counteract the tensions that come from dealing with impatient, irate, and often racist customers from the global North. Kimberly described her work as the performance of trans-specific sociality:

Kimberly: But as for us trans women, we have been the favorites in every team. We're funny. We're gonna be dancing while taking calls. We do that.

Interviewer: How? With the headset on?

Kimberly: With the headset on. While talking to the customer, we're gonna be, like, dancing. Everybody's gonna be laughing.

Interviewer: Is there music?

Kimberly: No. It just makes everybody laugh, because you know sometimes how boring it is and how frustrating it is in an environment where everyone's busy, just taking frustrating calls. Sometimes you just have to do that, and transgendered women, they're the ones who keep the team all active, because everybody's . . . we always make them laugh so that they don't get bored.

By performing stereotypical expectations similar to those required in other sectors of the Philippine labor market where trans women are concentrated, these workers use humor and entertainment to ease workplace tensions. The cisgender woman supervisor quoted above made similar observations, remarking that trans workers' lighthearted manner is coupled with

diligence: “They’re the ones who bring laughter to the team, they joke around, but in terms of the job, they’re serious. Most of these people that I have dealt with are those who are really top, good performers. They exert a lot of effort to prove something.” A cisgender man I interviewed thought trans women in call centers excel, “particularly in sales,” because “they tend to be fearless, more nurturing, or romantic in their voice than any ordinary men.”

These statements suggest that purple-collar labor is compatible with a neoliberal entrepreneurial spirit. For example, Angel reflected on phone interactions during her days as a customer service representative, describing a strategic use of gender code switching: “If I’m talking to a guy, I have to sound like a female, since it is sales. That’s my strategy, to make the guy say ‘yes.’ But if it is a female I have to change my voice.” “Really!?” I asked. “Yeah! Just to make sales. If I’m talking to women, I change my name from Jenny to Josh. Like, ‘Hi, this is Josh, and I’m calling on behalf of [company].’ So I change my voice, because foreign males, they like ‘sexy voice.’” She sped up when delivering the word “sexy.” “Yeah, some of those truck drivers in [the] States. I do the sexy voice just to make them, like, ‘yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,’ and give their credit card numbers.”

Angel’s actions exemplify what Mimi Schippers (2002, 40) calls “gender maneuvering” or “efforts to manipulate the relationship between masculinity and femininity as it takes shape in the general patterns of social relations.” As a sales strategy, Angel’s maneuvering was enabled by the invisibility granted by call center technologies. Her strategic use of the aliases “Jenny” and “Josh” and her manipulations of heterosexuality through talk are linked to global capital in ways that include an erotic component. Reminiscent of the phone sex industry, which relies on “disembodiment of intimacy” (Flowers 1998), her repetition of “yes” hints at sexual fantasies across racial, ethnic, and classed categories.

Some transgender call center workers draw on stereotypical Filipino queer cultures to motivate fellow employees and relieve stress. For example, Trisha, a trans woman supervisor who oversees entry-level agents, reported deploying a queer inflection to ease agents’ anxiety during her evaluations of quality-control recordings of their phone conversations:

Trisha: I’m like the motivator. Maybe it’s because of my bubbly personality. I will crack them out, do some jokes. It’s all about motivation sometimes. Because I do understand it’s a very stressful environment.

Interviewer: What would you do to help them reduce their stress?

Trisha: I make them laugh. And there's my style when I do feedback, I would be more confrontational. But not in a bad way, not, "You're doin' bad," but it's like, "I can't believe you're doing bad, girl!" I make it in a funny way. But still, the essence is there that they're doing bad, but in a funny way, because it's a Filipino culture to be non-confrontational compared to Americans. We just don't like confrontations. Some [agents] would just stammer, sweat. "Girl, I'm not gonna eat you, I'm just gonna listen to the call."

Such inflections and changes in tone are part of the subcultural queer Filipino slang known as "swardspeak," which Martin Manalansan (2003, 47) describes as a "crucial marker of 'being bakla.'" Here, Trisha's interactional work produced queer value for the company, supplementing and mollifying her formal occupational role of disciplining agents in a culture of "feedback," a role that may seem foreign and confrontational to many Filipinos. In theorizing the "purple collar," it is worth noting that interactional performances that give rise to "queer value" in this market setting do not arise from gay, trans, or *bakla* Filipino subjects in an essentialist way.⁶ Instead, these subcultural styles and queer codes are learned, sustained, and often self-consciously mobilized in social interaction.

Trisha's performance of purple-collar labor is comparable to that accomplished by transgender Filipinas in another labor context where queer value is produced and trans-ness commodified. In a study of migrant Filipina hostesses in Tokyo, Rhacel Parreñas found that transgender entertainers working in female hostess clubs were "usually made the leader, otherwise known as the *chi-mama*, whose work it is to discipline and keep younger female workers in line" (2011, 285). Parreñas notes that these transgender Filipinas were responsible for ensuring that entertainers were prepared for the club's "variety shows." While the contexts are quite different, transgender workers in both cases have particular occupational roles and responsibilities that mobilize trans in the social organization of work.

My interviewees' discussions of purple-collar labor also focus on relations among transgender employees. Later, Trisha mentioned her interactions with other trans women:

Trisha: There were two. The funniest thing was, it was two of them, and the other one was . . . everybody loves, and the other one, everybody hates [laughs]. You know? [laughs] One was Irene, the one who . . . because she was funny, she has this clownish personality that when you see her, even if you would just look at her face, you would really laugh and it will make her day, even if she's not doing anything.

Interviewer: Why would you laugh just looking at her?

Trisha: Because she's funny. She's that funny! [laughs] And the other one was Evelyn. Oh, my God, she was pretentious, she was a little bit bitchy. So there was a little bit of bias there, and it really pissed Evelyn off so bad, because people were okay with Irene going to the [women's] restroom, but if it was Evelyn, that was the time the complaints came. HR even had to intervene.

Trisha's interview shows how purple-collar labor requires carefully calibrated performances and self-management of competing gender expectations. Failure to perform purple-collar labor can incur workplace penalties that stratify transgender employees. Numerous interviewees reported limiting gender expressions to avoid being labeled too "loud," referring to an overperformance of stereotypically queer and trans femininities. For many trans women, purple-collar labor requires negotiating a fragile balance between expressing too little and too much trans-femininity. These dynamics break down potential solidarities by focusing on individual constructions of proper and productive capacities.

Trans-Segregation

Call centers in the Philippines aim to create relaxed and playful organizational environments. Managers organize offsite team-building events, such as sports competitions, company picnics, and beach trips, which fold leisure and consumption into workplace relations and teamwork. Based on my interviews, I found that these social activities provide occasions for the formal and informal segregation of transgender subjects, a phenomenon that I call "trans-segregation," which provides clear evidence that purple-collar labor is distinct from other gendered workplace arrangements both structurally and interactionally.

My first example of trans-segregation comes from Kyla's account of her company's annual Family Day. There were games for three categories of players: cis men, cis women, and transgender women. The cis men, she told me, played traditional Filipino games such as *Palo Sebo*, which involves scaling a tall, greased bamboo pole, and *Habulan ng Baboy*, in which participants attempt to catch pigs released into a confined area. Cis women played *Patintero*, a game akin to tag. Kyla also discussed a trans-segregated competition, *Pera o Bayong*, a game (popularized on Filipino television variety shows) in which a host asks contestants to choose between a known amount of money (*pera*) and a bag (*bayong*) with a surprise that may be worth more than the *pera* but may also be a gag item,

like a salted egg. Only trans women were invited to play *Pera o Bayong*, illustrating formal trans-segregation at a work-related function. It is worth noting that there was no mention of a structurally equivalent game for transgender men, supporting my claim that, in this context, the purple collar is more pink than blue.

Reflecting on the game, she said, “For us, it’s really fun to participate, because it’s only once a year that we have our Family Day. So we really enjoy that. And me and my friend actually joined.” They were among 12 transgender contestants. Kyla showed me pictures of the event, pointing out that they were required to wear “little black dresses” because the event planners wanted to create a “fun game” that would “entertain the people.” She described their entrance on stage via a catwalk performance: “It’s like a normal fashion show or runway. We’re walking like a model or something. It’s fun. We enjoy that, especially when there are a lot of cheers from our colleagues and friends.” Kyla and others reported that they derived pleasure and a sense of group solidarity from these activities. Although Kyla did not frame this work as alienating or as an added burden, it’s clear that workplace expectations to be stereotypically “entertaining” carried over into off-the-clock leisure spaces. While there was no immediate remuneration for entertaining colleagues and their families, these transgender Filipinas’ unwaged labor was repaid in cheers, applause, and gift bags.

Trans-segregated activities also appear in a second example: transgender beauty pageants in call centers, which, according to my interviewees, take place several times a year in some companies, complete with ball gowns and competition makeup. In these cases, narrow dress and conduct codes seem to be temporarily suspended to allow for dramatic expression of trans femininities. Dalisay described how transgender pageants are regularly organized in break rooms and lobbies and, in toned-down versions, even on the call center floor during work hours:

Dalisay: We have lobbies and recreational areas where we can conduct the pageant. Or there are pageants that, like, you can take in calls, you just have to present yourself, you just have to wear a sash stating a country, USA. They just announce the country, “Miss USA,” and the name. You just have to stand up while having the headset.

Interviewer: So you’re taking the call in the sash?

Dalisay: Yeah. Not wearing bikinis, of course! [laughs] Just wearing normal dress. They will request for an off-line for five or ten minutes. They would pull you out from the [operations] floor to take pictures, and then they will show that to the [foreign] clients and managers. It’s just for fun.

These social activities are an extension of what Avery Gordon has described as “multicultural corporatism,” in which “corporate culture links a vision of racial and gender *diversity* to its existing relations of ruling” in which the “management of racial and gender identities and conflicts” becomes the “core component of the new corporate culture” (Gordon 1995, 3). For outsourcing companies, creating a trans-segregated space is part of the more general incorporation of social diversity into corporate workplace culture.

CONCLUSION

Global transgender movements are gaining momentum in the twenty-first century. In some segments of this movement, activists are pressing for rights and inclusion within existing social institutions and the marketplace. These collective efforts are creating new opportunities for transgender people to build livelihoods. Yet, as difference is incorporated into workplaces, new institutional and interactional relations are taking shape. Despite their virtues, “rights” strategies can potentially divide affected groups by relying on neoliberal ideas about who is a “deserving” and “proper” subject (Spade 2011).⁷

In this article, I develop the purple-collar concept to describe workplace clustering, scattering, and segregation of transgender women; and to discuss how these employees foster productivity through affective interactional labor. My examination of transgender call center agents in the Philippines shows how interactional processes of “doing transgender” (Connell 2010) are folded into corporate culture. Data show how organizational structures of global companies adapt to local gender arrangements and cultural practices, such as transgender beauty pageants, to build employee morale and foster team-based workplaces. Trans subjects are often expected to produce queer value through their performance of a specifically Filipino queerness, a lightheartedness that yields comfort among workplace teams. By engaging in narrowly defined gender performances, purple-collar laborers play a pivotal role as emotional shock absorbers in the outsourcing industry by putting their customers and coworkers at ease.

This research contributes to literature on transgender employment experiences, especially the emerging “political economy of transsexuality” (Connell 2012, 857). My argument about the queer value of purple-collar labor illustrates the “normalization of transgressions”; as Irving (2008b, 54) argues, “Transsexual individuals can be viewed as viable

neoliberal subjects. . . . To many, emphasizing the normative potential of transsexuality has been a successful strategy to counter the marginalizing effects of pathologization. The legitimizing of the transsexual worker, however, does not offer serious challenges to heteronormativity, nor does it illuminate the conditions of hyperexploitation that structure neoliberalism. In fact, these narratives dovetail with hegemonic discourses concerning the upstanding citizen and the necessity of entrepreneurialism.” By tracing flows of capital across borders through experiences of workers in a globalized occupation, new questions can be asked about what role the inclusion of transgender subjects plays in larger projects of capital accumulation. Attention must be given to the ways in which increased acceptance of a wider range of workplace identities has been coterminous with rising inequalities across the globe.

Finally, my interviews show how the purple collar creates the conditions for emergent hierarchies among transgender employees. While workplace relations can serve as the foundation for group-based politics, these hierarchies reveal how competitive individualism and a neoliberal entrepreneurial spirit factor into the leveraging of respectable statuses by some trans subjects over others. The privileging of “proper” transgender subjects risks leaving others behind, particularly those without access to formal education (which provide advanced English language skills and possibilities for class mobility and thus distance from the *bakla* category) or those whose gender expressions are considered inappropriate for the workplace. While trans women are expected to perform in stereotypical ways, their gender expressions (appearance, conduct, and dress) must also remain within certain limits deemed respectable and workplace-appropriate.

The purple-collar labor concept developed here has focused on one particular labor market sector, but it is flexible enough to be used in other empirical contexts. Future research could explore the purple-collar concept’s utility in other historical, cultural, and intersectional contexts, in a variety of formal and informal economies, and in situations in which global knowledge systems must confront shifting categorical relations between gender and sexuality. Researchers could examine these issues quantitatively, particularly with robust quantitative techniques that collect data on transgender statuses, although quantification might not fully capture the interactional dynamics at play in workplace productions of queer value. Some U.S. universities have begun providing options on admissions applications for self-identification beyond the gender binary; the American Sociological Association has expanded membership options to include transgender statuses; and social media sites now offer dozens of

gender options. These shifts allow for new kinds of public gender identification as well as new forms of data collection. However, as Anuja Agrawal (1997) cautions, “The greater number of genders, the greater their oppressive potential as each may demand the conformity of the individual within increasingly narrower confines.” The proliferation of options for gender identification creates new possibilities for recognition and social validation, but incorporation of trans-identities can also be put to work in the global expansion of neoliberal capitalism.

NOTES

1. The colors purple and lavender have been central for gay liberation movements and for queer communities, though such color coding is not uniform, given “pink washing” (Puar 2007) and the “pink dollar” (Chasin 2000).

2. For a genealogy of “cisgender,” see Enke (2012).

3. On the institutionalization of the category “transgender” in the United States, see Valentine (2007). On the challenges of classifying transgender, see Jenness and Fenstermaker (2014).

4. Stryker (2009, 83) offers another possible English translation of *bakla*: “faggot,” a translation that emphasizes its use as an epithet.

5. I do not adopt discourses of “third gender” in which *bakla* is sometimes placed, because these “transgender native” tropes have been used as romanticized, ahistorical evidence to challenge Western categories (Towle and Morgan 2002).

6. The purple collar need not be anchored in transgender women’s subjectivities, because there exists in Philippine parlance the *babaeng bakla*, which one informant describes as “biological” women (*babae* in Tagalog) or girls who “act like us as trans.”

7. Addressing similar concerns in the experiences of trans women of color, Vidal-Ortiz points out that the “line between culturally permissible work and ‘deviant’ labor is often blurred for women of color, depending on their treatment in the socioeconomic system, whether as second-class citizens, colonial subjects or undocumented immigrants” (Vidal-Ortiz 2009, 100).

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