



# Calling on Femininity? Gender, Call Centers, and Restructuring in the Rural American West

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the geographical processes (re)shaping the call center industry in the rural American West. In light of growing public debate concerned with globalization and the “outsourcing” of information service jobs from Western, industrialized locations to ‘third world’ nations, I argue that it is also significant to document the expansion of the call center industry within the rural western United States. In this paper, I examine the economic shifts and cultural narratives circumscribing call center growth in this region. First, I consider telephones as a gendered technology. I link this analysis to the feminized construction of call center work and the gendered practices and stereotypes that work to devalue women’s labor in call centers while simultaneously constructing women as best suited for this type of employment. I then unpack the ways in which call centers in the rural American West are linked to the processes of rapid restructuring and economic transition. Locating the processes of transnational capitalism and rural

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restructuring within a feminist geographic perspective, I argue that the social construction of call center work concentrates women in occupations that tend to be clustered at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy in the “new information economy”.

## **Introduction**

In this unparalleled moment of global competition and technological change, the emergence and continued development of computer and telecommunications technologies has opened up – and indeed invited – the possibility for dramatic changes in the location of economic activities. Unquestionably, these innovations make it technologically possible to transfer a vast amount of information at speeds and across distances previously unimaginable. Together with the trends of deregulation in the telecommunications industry and the decreasing costs of telephone-related activities, the global trade of information services is rapidly growing. Within the US, these changes have facilitated the repositioning of information processing and telecommunication services, to decentralized and/or disparate locations both within the US and outside of the US. Interest in the spatial dimensions of call centers has intensified in the context of the increasingly mobile nature of work in the “new information economy” (Richardson and Gillespie, 2003; Wheeler et al., 2000).

Call centers figure prominently within these discussions, particularly because of the ever more decentralized, portable structure of the industry and because of the interactive, even performative, nature of the work. Most markedly, call centers are affiliated with the globalizing processes of offshoring, wherein workers in low cost, low wage areas provide services and support for clients within higher wage, industrialized regions (Larner, 2001; Wajcman, 1991). Yet, in spite of the overwhelming focus on the offshoring and “outsourcing” of call center work, a considerable proportion of this industry continues to be located in the ‘first world’ (Richardson and Belt, 2001; Richardson and Gillespie, 2003; Batt et al., 2004; Wirtz, 2005) and is increasingly documented as a particularly low-wage, poorly benefited employment sector (Batt et al., 2004; Larner, 2001; Belt et al., 2002).

In this paper, I explore the intersections between capitalist restructuring, flexible and feminized call center work, and patterns of call center employment in the rural American West. I emphasize rural areas in the American West in my research on call centers for a number of reasons. First, this area is generally not at the forefront of discussions concerned with changes in the telecommunications industry. Rather, examinations linking telecommunications technologies and economic restructuring markedly emphasize urban contexts (e.g. Wheeler et al., 2000; Castells, 1989; Graham and Marvin, 2001). In fact, the decentralization of information services and the active recruitment of call centers in nonmetropolitan

communities have accelerated the movement of telecommunications industry to more suburban and rural contexts in the United States. This shift was set in motion by the cost-saving logics of capitalist restructuring and was further facilitated by the 1996 Telecommunications Act which guaranteed rural and low-income areas of the United States with affordable access to telecommunications and internet services (Stenberg et al., 1998; McMahon and Salant, 1999). Proponents of this act anticipated benefits in rural economies resulting from job creation and the development of new technological services in rural communities (Stenberg et al., 1998).

Second, within literature documenting the decentralization of services, rural communities are commonly perceived merely as extensions to or recipients of economic change, rather than as active participants (Glasmeier and Howland, 1995). In contrast, rural telecommunications research identifies the important role of economic development agencies and policy makers in recruiting firms and making technological and infrastructural investments (Wollford and Hollifield, 1997; Richardson and Belt, 2001). Because it is harder to attract both industries and telecom service providers to rural areas, which are generally not regarded as profitable investments, rural communities have become more “proactive” and compete for telecommunications investment (McMahon and Salant, 1999). Call centers, “back office” establishments, and other similar operations have been widely advocated by rural economic development planners as good firms to target (Stenberg et al., 1998). These firms are seen as a strategy to attract new jobs and kinds of employment that develop and enhance the skill base in rural and poor communities (Gurtstein, 2003; Richardson and Gillespie, 2003).

Finally, rural communities tend to be disproportionately impacted by the dynamics of neoliberal globalization and restructuring (McGranahan, 2003). Rural regions have undergone significant industry and population shifts, particularly stemming from the transition of rural economies from agricultural and resource-dependent activities to the dominance of the service sector. Indeed, service sector employment accounts for the majority of job growth within rural areas. Furthermore, the prominence of service industries within nonmetropolitan communities, indicative of the growing number of rural economies dependent on low-wage, low-skilled employment, is increasingly linked to a deepening economic hardship (Faulk and Lobao, 2003). In spite of the questionable future of call centers and the generally low-wages and limited opportunities they provide to economically vulnerable areas, rural communities are recruiting this industry (Wollford and Hollifield, 1997).

This paper builds on the growing body of literature on call centers in order to develop a deeper understanding of the specific social and economic context of call centers in the rural American West. I utilize occupational data and industry statistics to identify call center trends in the American West. In addition, I draw

from recent academic literature detailing the spatial, economic, and social themes of the telecommunications industry as well as studies examining the social and economic effects of telecommunications investment in rural communities. I contrast this body of literature with popular media sources, principally newspapers and magazines, in order to contextualize debates about “offshoring” and call center employment patterns. In line with feminist insights to research methodology, I am interested in these popular media texts and discourses as “cultural artifacts” indicative and productive of particular economic dynamics, social organization, technology, and cultural patterns (Reinharz, 1992, 147; Rose, 2001). Through a review of newspapers, magazines, and websites concerned with call centers and telecommunications between the years of 1990 and 2000, I argue that discussions concerned with call center employment have overwhelmingly emphasized the dynamics of technological innovation and “outsourcing”, and that this emphasis has worked to obscure both the gendered nature of this work and the rural spaces in which much of it takes place.

Building from this finely-grained review of call center literature and an examination of recent industry data, I begin by locating the gendered construction of the telephone and telecommunications work within feminist discussions about gender and technology. I then explore the rapid growth in call centers and the particularly feminized nature of the industry’s expansion. Finally, I outline the patterns of call center growth in the rural American West, focusing specifically on the economic dynamics linked to this industry’s development. Through these threads of analysis, the paper examines the processes producing call center growth in the American West and the ways in which the industry is particularly reliant on a gendered labor force. I argue that in spite of the industry’s dependence on women’s labor, the majority of literature concerned with call centers in the American West fails to address the “feminization” of rural information services.

## **Gender, Technology, and Telephones**

Feminists theorizing technology have long argued that technology is not neutral, but rather is powerfully embedded in range of social, economic, and political contexts (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999; Haraway, 1990; Wajcman, 1991). These interventions highlight technology’s complex and contingent social effects and the ways in which technological developments work to extend and reinforce existing power relations and social divisions. In fact, much research on the gendered construction of technology argues that it necessitates particular patterns of social difference to function (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). In this sense, technologies work to open certain possibilities for some and foreclose options for others according to status and location within specifically gendered social hierarchies. Feminist work in this vein has increasingly emphasized the role

of information technology in shaping new subjectivities and constructions of identity (Boyer, 2004; Kwan, 2002; England, 1993; Haraway, 1990).

Indeed, telephones themselves are identified as important mechanisms for the gendered shaping of technology (Rakow, 1992). That is, notions about women and the telephone are part of the discursive production and constitution of femininity. For instance, gendered representations of women's use of the telephone often promote and maintain assumptions about women as "chatty" and on the phone too much (Rakow, 1992). As Rakow (1992, 2) points out, the figure of the gossiping woman monopolizing the phone line is "a stock image in American Satire". Additionally, gendered ideologies about telephone usage mark (some) women as the possessors of proper telephone manners and etiquette.<sup>2</sup> Notions about women's telephone conduct and their communication abilities are rooted in broader assumptions underlying appropriate femininity and politeness. Such representations codify and reduce women's (over)use of the telephone to fundamental differences in skills and personality between women and men, rather than as socially constructed enactments of gender differences.

The currently gendered landscape of call center employment can be traced to the emergence of telephone switchboard operators, often referred to as "hello girls" (Frahm, 2004). Because of their patience and ability to communicate, young women were alleged to naturally possess the necessary skills for switchboard operation. Reminiscent of the "hello girls", women continue to be recruited for call center jobs because of gendered notions of skill. Therefore, use of the telephone and telecommunications work by women reflects wider beliefs based on essentialized notions about femininity and women's 'natural' tendencies and abilities. The overrepresentation of women within call centers is founded upon gendered meanings and practices that locate them in a particular configuration of social and economic power relations. As such, call centers are sites where meanings and practices about gender are actively expressed, reinforced, and contested.

The expansion of feminist research into the geographies of employment has importantly documented the construction and (re)production of work and gender divisions of labor. This work has been key in interrogating waged labor as a socially and spatially constructed activity in the capitalist, public sphere of production and reproductive work as occurring in the private, feminized household sphere (Nagar et al., 2002). Feminists argue that these constructions of gender, space, and employment are intimately connected to the continued devaluation of particular forms of work in both the formal and informal spheres. The discursive

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, notions about gender and etiquette are also inscribed by ideologies of race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality.

construction of 'women's work' as caring and reproductive serves both to devalue women's paid work while simultaneously constructing women as better suited for certain types of jobs. As one of the fastest growing sectors in the global economy, the role of women's labor in the growth of the telecommunications industry signals both the extension of a feminized market and the "deskilling" of information and data processing.

However, the construction and reliance on women as a flexible and deskilled source of labor is not a new dynamic arising from the expansion of telecommunications and information technologies within the "new information economy". Women's incorporation into waged labor and their role in the expansion of export-led industrialization and economic development is widely documented in feminist literature (e.g. Pearson, 1998; Freeman, 2000). This form of production signaled a shift in the traditional division of labor wherein high-value manufactured goods were produced in industrialized nations and supplied by the raw materials of nations in the global 'south'. Feminists recognized women's labor as a key component of this new international division of labor and understood that the construction of women as flexible is fundamental to this transition. This global "feminization of labor" became emblemized by the dramatic increase in women's flexible, deregulated employment and by the expansion of part-time, casual, and seasonal employment practices (Pearson, 1998; Freeman, 2000; Nagar et al., 2002). Call centers represent an important extension of the feminization of production in the "new information economy", particularly as economic restructuring has facilitated the rapid growth of a highly polarized and segmented service sector. Although the "new economy" is frequently distinguished by technological innovation and its highly skilled "knowledge workers" (e.g. Wheeler et al., 2000), it has also given rise to the proliferation of low-skill, low-pay employment and greater labor market segmentation and polarization in services (Gurstein, 2003).

Call centers are thus particularly useful sites for feminist geographic research concerned with the gendering of workers and workplaces not only because women comprise the majority of the global workforce (Elmoudden, 2004; Belt et al., 2000; 2002), but also because of the industry's ability to link people and cultures across socially and geographically disparate contexts. Feminist geography's attention to spatiality and scale draws attention to the correspondence of place with material economic processes and the role of spatial structure in shaping patterns of economic change and restructuring. In this sense, call center research is therefore patently connected to scholarship in feminist geography that examines the gendering of particular kinds of work and notions of skill (e.g. Freeman, 2000; England, 1993; Lawson, 1999). In addition, feminists' important insights into the gendered processes of transnationalism and globalization and the role of gender hierarchies in constituting cultural constructions of difference are central in mapping the spatial dynamics of call centers (e.g. Nagar et al., 2002; Grewal and Kaplan, 1994; Mohanty, 2002). Moreover, a feminist geographic

perspective destabilizes and more fully interrogates the notions about the “end of geography” or “the death of distance” (Larner, 2001, 300), which circumscribes contemporary discussions of the telecommunications industry in popular and academic discourses.

## **The Gendered Geography of Call Centers**

Most broadly, call centers are defined as sites wherein services related to technical support, sales, and reservations are rendered for firms and clients in remote locations<sup>3</sup> (Larner, 2001, 298; Richardson and Belt, 2001; Belt et al., 2002; Richardson and Gillespie, 2003). Though call centers are most commonly identified as centralized operations, technological advances and pressures on labor costs are facilitating the growth of home working in the industry (Gurstein, 2003; Wilson and Greenhill, 2004; Shanley, 2005). Call centers are established by a wide range of industries, but are most frequently associated with banking, information technology, telecommunications, insurance, and medical services (Batt et al., 2004; Elmoulden, 2004). Call centers include “in-house” centers, which serve a firm’s own customers, and subcontracted or “outsourced” centers, which serve the customers of other firms on a contractual basis. In-house call centers constitute 86 percent of the market while outsourced centers account for 14 percent (Batt et al., 2004). Because the bulk of this work requires the receiving and/or making of telephone calls and information processing, employees in call centers have nearly continuous interface with customers. Call center “agents”, as workers are called in industry literature, commonly accept approximately 120 calls per day (Thompson 2003, 143, cited in Elmoulden, 2004, 6). The numbers of calls taken per day tend to be much higher in subcontracted and outsourced call centers in both global ‘north’ and global ‘south’ contexts (Batt et al., 2004).

With the exception of the Internet, call centers are frequently identified as the fastest site for expansion in the global telecommunications industry. In fact, industry reports contend that call centers are the most rapidly growing global service sector with approximately 160,000 operations worldwide (Gurstein, 2003; Elmoulden, 2004). A 2004 US call center industry report estimates that 50,000 call centers in the United States employ approximately three percent of the workforce (Batt et al., 2004). Perhaps more adequately highlighting the dramatic

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<sup>3</sup> Belt et al. (2002) call attention to the fact that call centers do not actually comprise an industry in traditional terms, given the wide range of services provided in the call center sector. Nonetheless, references to the “call center industry” within the literature are prevalent. Larner (2001) further complicates the definition of call centers by highlighting the increasing significance of e-commerce (computer and internet based exchanges) and the “potential for ‘virtual’ call centers involving teleworkers in spatially disaggregated locations” (Larner, 2001, 298).

growth of call centers, a recent business article claims “companies like GE Capital and Convergys are hiring as many as 400 people every month to feed their growing demand. GE Capital even has a call center to handle the job applications for their call center” (Shastri, 2004, 1).

Despite the large proportion of information service jobs predicted to be outsourced in the near future, a significant portion of growth in this industry remains located within ‘first’ world nations (Batt et al., 2004; Gurstein, 2003; Richardson and Gillespie, 2003). In fact, recent industry data documents the US teleservice industry as generating more than \$660 billion in sales in 2001, accounting for approximately six percent of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (The Telemarketing Resource Center, 2004). Tracking the size and growth of the call center industry is difficult because of data limitations;<sup>4</sup> in fact, “customer service representative” appeared as an occupational category for the first time in the 2000 US Census (code 524). In spite of these statistical dilemmas, the number of employees working in call centers within the United States in 2003 was estimated to be about 4 million, up from approximately 2.5 million in 1999 (Wirtz, 2005). The states of California and Texas contain the highest number of call centers, but growth in other more rural Western states such as Idaho, Oregon, Colorado, Arizona, and Washington is also evident in the most recently released Business and Economic Census (Economic Census, 2002).

In both the “onshore” and “offshore” contexts, the call center industry is particularly reliant on women’s labor. Though the exact percentage varies by cultural and geographic context, it is estimated the at least 70 percent of the global call center workforce is comprised of female workers (Elmouldden, 2004). In this US, the 2004 Call Center Industry Report documents 66 percent of call center workers to be women, but also importantly acknowledges wide variation across the industry with women disproportionately concentrated in lower-pay call center occupations. For instance, the number of women employed in retail and financial service call centers is much higher than the national average: women make up 73 and 69 percent of workforce respectively (Batt et al., 2004).

Prompted by the unprecedented growth of “outsourcing” within the global telecommunications sector, the “offshoring” of call center work has received a substantial amount of consideration in popular media discussions (e.g. Porter, 2004; Shastri, 2004; Davis, 2004). Contemporary debates range from the

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<sup>4</sup> First, as a sector, call centers take on many forms (e.g. in-house, back-office, or home-based) and are affiliated with many industries, making their individual operations difficult to count. Second, there was no call center category within the Standard Industry Classification (SIC) system. More recently, the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) has included a call center category, but the most up-to-date information comes from the most recent Business and Economic Census.



documentation of job losses in industrialized nations, the legitimation of outsourcing trends by free-trade protectionists, and accounts of increasing anxiety in ‘first-world’ nations resulting from the outsourcing of information services.<sup>5</sup> Although industry representatives, recruiters and business analysts characterize call center work as knowledge based, technologically advanced labor in a skilled environment (e.g. Davis, 2004; Shastri, 2004), the majority of academic accounts have drawn attention to the routinization and repetition of call center work, to the extent that these activities are often compared to the work undertaken in factory assembly lines (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 1999).

Because the call center industry involves the separation of certain service activities, work is spatially concentrated at specific, often disparate, offices or departments. Ostensibly, “front office” activities, involving face-to-face customer interaction, are separated from “back office” activities, such as data processing and service provision, in order to realize economies of scale and labor and land cost savings (Richardson and Gillespie, 2003). Following this line of industry organization, call center services are commonly spatially separated from headquarter offices and located in places where labor costs and land rents are lower. The central technology shaping employment procedures in call centers is the Automated Call Distribution (ACD) system, which distributes calls and their spacing and monitors work performance (Belt et al., 2002; Elmoulden, 2004). As a consequence of this system, Fernie and Metcalf (1998) describe the call center work environment as an “electronic panopticon” in which calls are “force fed” to call center agents on an “unstoppable conveyer belt”<sup>6</sup> (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998, 9). According to their argument, the ACD technology allows call center workers to be constantly surveilled by supervisors, often in remote locales.

Call center work primarily requires the reading of a script given by employers in order to mediate employee interaction with customers on the phone (Batt et al., 2004; Belt et al., 2000; 2002). In fact, the scripted nature of the work is

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<sup>5</sup> One does not need to look far to find documentations of these anxieties. These discussions usually center around the discomforts of interacting with workers in the ‘third’ world (Mehta and Datta, 2004; Brodeur, 2004) to feelings of anger and discomfort stemming from the loss of jobs from ‘first’ world nations to the ‘third’ world (Mehta and Datta, 2004; Konrad, 2004). A recent quote captures these tensions in the high-tech industry: “‘Globalization’ is becoming a dirty work to US high tech workers, increasingly anxious and angry as their jobs disappear overseas, never to return” (K. Mieszkowski, quoted in Elmoulden, 2004, 2).

<sup>6</sup> Fernie and Metcalf’s (1998) analogy receives criticism, particularly from Bain and Taylor (2000) for describing supervisory power in call centers as seamless. A growing body of work documents resistance and subversion by call center employees (e.g. Taylor and Bain, 1999)

increasingly compared to a form of theatrical performance.<sup>7</sup> Though not all call centers require standardized scripts, most call centers provide a list of instructions to follow, typically encompassing items that agents should or should not communicate in their interactions with customers<sup>8</sup> (Elmouldden, 2004, 6). Crucial to call center scripting is the maintenance of personal traits and emotional behavior. For instance, accents and voice tones must be standardized and workers are encouraged to be well-mannered and friendly to customers. The consequences of straying from these standardized mandates can be severe (Belt et al., 2000). Stemming from the external façade agents are required to take on, call center work is often related to Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor (e.g. Taylor and Bain, 1999; Fernandez et al., 2005). A recently interviewed call center employee explains the requirements for her job in this way: "You have to be polite even if the customer is rude; I have to give a patient ear to all" (Mehta and Datta, 2004, 1). Such efforts, therefore, clearly require call center agents to manipulate themselves in order provide service or to respond to customer needs. Given the feminized structure and constitution of the call center workforce, the governance of call center agents is necessarily gendered. A call center manager, explaining the gender-differentiated outcomes of his surveillance, notes: "I find that the girls do the work better, they stay on-line and like what they are meant to do....whereas I think the men are constantly coming off-line and to try and do other things" (in Belt et al., 2002, 30).

Reflecting the gendered composition of the industry, women are concentrated in the more routinized, clerical related jobs while men comprise a greater proportion of the more technical, software-related employment in the telecommunications sector (Sim and Young, 1995; Belt et al., 2002; Larner, 2001; Wajcman, 1991). Although call centers are particularly reliant on a gendered labor force, most industry literature does not attend to the trend of "feminization" within telecommunications and also does not differentiate between male and female employees (Elmouldden, 2004; Larner, 2001). Nonetheless, male and female labor within call centers is both viewed and utilized differently by managers and employers (Belt et al., 2002). Indeed, research on call centers extensively documents that firms perceive women as best suited for call center work because of their presumed communication and social abilities, in particular, their capacity to "smile down the phone" (Larner, 2001, 303; also Marshall and Richardson, 1996;

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<sup>7</sup> The scripting of call center interactions has been significantly debated. In non-Western contexts, particularly in India and the Philippines, for instance, American TV shows and movies are often utilized as training tapes as part of a "voice neutralization" process (Elmouldden 2004). In fact, Ali Zaidi has written a play entitled *Alladeen* that focuses on the theatrical nature of call center work among Indian women.

<sup>8</sup> Ironically, one of the items that call center agents are frequently asked not to reveal is their location.

Belt et al., 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999). Stereotypical perceptions of skill and femininity are qualities markedly pursued and reinforced within the call center sector. In light of these industry dynamics, it is not surprising that firms tend to be attracted to specific areas where large pools of predominantly female workers are located.

Call centers do tend to create job opportunities for women. An recent industry website boasting the benefits of the teleservices industry in the US claims that “jobs [in teleservices] create opportunities for women, minorities, working mothers, students, part-time workers and people with disabilities” (The Telemarketing Resource Center, 2004). However, the employment opportunities created in call centers are circumscribed by the flexible nature of the work. Call center workers are most often “part-time permanent employees”, responsible for a variety shifts at various times in the day (Taylor and Bain, 1999, 115). Call center shifts generally last for 8 to 12 hours, and there are frequently three shifts during each 24 hour period (Elmoulden, 2004, 6). Workers are often required to work complicated shifts, some extending throughout the night to meet both the time zone requirements of employers and the constant demand of customers. The opportunities for mobility within the workforce are often limited (Richardson and Belt, 2001) and management positions are typically filled by workers “parachuted in” from main offices (Richardson and Gillespie, 2003, 102). Thus, although call centers may create work opportunities for women and others, the circumstances shaping call center careers may be less encouraging given the flexible and provisional character of the work, and the “flat” organizational structure of call center organizations, which provide little room for career enhancement or promotion (Gurstein, 2003; Batt et al., 2004).

### **Call Centers and Economic Change in the Rural American West**

The shifting geographies of labor brought about by the processes of deindustrialization and globalization have generated an increased awareness of the spatial implications of economic processes. Furthermore, both the globalizing nature of product exchanges and the growth of just-in-time business operations are increasing the need for firms to provide twenty-four hour services to a spatially diffuse customer base. In this context, firms strategically select call center sites in correspondence to the time zone requirements for their business transactions. Equally important, firms seek out governments supporting privatization and tax breaks around telecommunication, paging, cellular, and Internet services (Larner, 2001). The infrastructural demands of call center firms had spurred the increased production of telecommunications facilities and ‘Software Technology Parks’ (STPs) and indeed, many governments are promoting such expansions as a source for local, regional, and national economic development (Konrad 2004; Larner, 2001; Richardson and Gillespie, 2003; Richardson and Belt, 2001). This is

particularly the case in the rural American West where call centers are part of economic development agenda in efforts to offset steady declines in agricultural and resource extraction employment.

Although call center work is often associated with urban-based growth, recent research also associates growth in this sector with rural locales. Characterized within industry literature as a “rush to rural America”, multiple accounts document the expansion of call center firms in rural American communities (Chittum, 2004; McMahan and Salant, 1999; Gurstein, 2003). Richardson and Gillespie (2003), for instance, emphasize the progressively increasing rates of call center firm location in rural areas within the United Kingdom and the United States. In addition, their research reveals the ability of call center firms within rural contexts to negotiate national wage agreements, in effect, colluding in order to set market wages (Richardson and Gillespie, 2003, 91). Glasmeier and Howland (1995) further comment on the tendency of large organizations to decentralize low-skilled, back office jobs to rural communities in the US. In fact, the average size of communities in which call centers locate in the United States is 23,000 (The Telemarketing Resource Center, 2004).

Facing uncertain economic futures resulting from the demise of long-established industries and the decentralization of manufacturing, rural communities are struggling to keep local economies afloat under increasing competition in deregulated markets (Glasmeier and Howland, 1995). Unquestionably, neoliberal economic restructuring has transformed the rural American West. With the consistent downward trend of employment in farming, mining, and timber, growth in the service sector now accounts for nearly all of employment growth in rural communities within the American West (McGranahan, 2003; Faulk and Lobao, 2003). Increasingly, rural communities in the American West have developed local economic development strategies to attract call centers and other telecommunication service providers in order to bring new employment opportunities to stagnating rural economies; to further develop and diversify the skills possessed by residents; and to better compete for telecommunication service provision and new industry investment (Stenberg et al., 1998; Richardson and Gillespie, 2003; Glasmeier and Howland, 1995; Richardson and Belt, 2001). Hence, these economic development agendas characterize the call center industry as a potential driving force for economic growth and renewal. Within industry literature, the rural locales featured as the new sites of economic development are imagined in a nostalgic, reminiscent manner, wherein rurality is equated with the traditional work ethic lacking in urban America (e.g. Grossman, 2004; Wirtz, 2005). As Grossman (2004) claims, there are “solid business opportunities in the grit of the men and women [in rural areas]...who had (sic) struggled to keep their farms and ranchers afloat as falling commodity prices and the crush of agribusiness crippled local economies”. Accordingly, the struggling economies in rural communities mark emergent business potential for those in the call center industry.

The most critical issue for call centers is labor, in terms of cost, location, and recruitment. Labor costs make up the majority of call center operating expenses, usually ranging from 60-80 percent, and as such, the cost of labor is an extremely significant factor in call center location (Wirtz, 2005; Richardson and Gillespie, 2003). Higher labor costs and lower unemployment rates in metropolitan areas, therefore, figure prominently into the dynamics of rural call center expansion. Rural communities in the American West have been keen to play up their low cost labor advantage (Glasmeier and Howland, 1995; Wirtz, 2005; Foss, 2004). Montana has seen approximately 3000 new call center jobs in the past two years, according to the state's Department of Commerce, and growth in this industry is attributed to the fact that Montana is known for having some of the lowest wages in the country (Wirtz, 2005). On average, call center agents in rural communities earn between six and eight dollars, although it is estimated that a living-wage job in this region should pay *at least* \$10.11 and *include* benefits, which most call centers do not (Foss, 2004).

While most of the call center growth in the region comes from small to medium sized firms employing approximately 30-80 employees (Wirtz, 2005), increasingly large firms such as Dell Inc., US Bank, and Royal Caribbean now operate call centers in remote locations in Idaho, Montana, Washington, and the Dakotas. Sioux Falls, South Dakota has, in fact, become something of a hub for financial call centers, with US Bank, Citibank, Wells Fargo, among others, operating substantially-sized centers in the area. Contributing to this expansion, North Dakota received eleven announcements for new or expanded call centers in the past year, estimated to create 1000 new call center jobs (Wirtz, 2005). Quite interestingly, Dell Inc., which had previously outsourced most of its call center work to India, relocated several of its call centers to diverse rural communities throughout the United States after receiving numerous complaints about US customer interaction with "overseas" workers (Chittum, 2004). A recent *Wall Street Journal* report characterizes these tensions in a way that is worth quoting at length:

It's the flipside of the outsourcing coin. As big companies start facing quality concerns and a political backlash from moving jobs overseas, America's small towns are emerging as alternatives. A company can move to a call center to, say, Nacogdoches, Texas (pop. 29,914) or Twin Falls, Idaho (pop. 34,369) and instantly start offering some of the best jobs in town – even if they pay only \$7 or 8 an hour (Chittum, 2004, 4).

Within these accounts, firms locating in rural communities in the United States are promoted as bringing much needed employment opportunities to communities experiencing industry downturns (e.g. Chittum, 2004; Wirtz, 2005). Lurking

beneath such benevolence, however, are a series of economic incentives that also shape firm decisions in call center site location.

In particular, though outsourced call centers offer the alleged “advantage” of a lower-cost labor force, the overhead generated from real estate and infrastructural updates can be substantial (Richard and Gillespie, 2003; Chittum, 2004). As most communities in the US now have access to high-bandwidth fiber optic cable as a result of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, start-up and maintenance operating costs are frequently less expensive. Additionally, the call center industry has been particularly burdened with extensive labor turnover. Resulting from the low-skill/repetitive job requirements, the low-wages, and international competition, call centers have difficulties employing a permanent, trained workforce (Wirtz, 2005; Richardson and Gillespie, 2003; Belt et al., 2002; Chittum, 2004). A number of industry sources note that few employment opportunities in rural communities create a “captive labor market” (Wirtz, 2005, 7), making them a viable choice for call centers (Chittum 2004). These industry reports, in fact, suggest that the smaller the city in which call centers are located, the better the call center performance, which is measured by the numbers of calls taken, problems resolved, and sales made: “[C]ities with high unemployment rates tend to have better performing call centers because workers have fewer jobs to pick from” (Chittum, 2004, 2).

Although the transfer of telecommunications and information processing work is frequently lauded as linking remote locations to the “new information economy” (e.g. McMahon and Salant, 1999; Grossman, 2004; Chittum, 2004), the long-term employment growth potential in this sector is questionable at best. Indeed, in some sense, call center relocations represent a parallel to the production changes brought about by automation and deindustrialization, which made economic activities dependent on a “skilled” labor pool scarce in recent decades. Moreover, as technologies continue to change the nature of call center work through the expansion of Internet and web-based communications, industry changes and reorganization loom heavy on the call center horizon.

### **Calling on Femininity: The Gendered Outcomes of Rural Call Center Growth**

Mirroring the global trend in industry discourses surrounding call centers, the vast majority of literature concerned with call centers in the American West fails to address the “feminization” of rural information services. As Lerner (2001, 303) contends, “[w]hile in discussions of call centers as a new means of economic growth the feminized nature of this sector is rarely explicitly acknowledged, it is widely understood that the social characteristics of call center workers are very different from those associated with more traditional resource based economies”. The economic landscape of call centers in the American West, therefore, marks a transition away from rural economic development strategies founded

manufacturing and the “model of the full-time male breadwinner” (Larner, 2001, 303). Even as masculinized industry discourses repeatedly, if redundantly, characterize this employment sector as cutting-edge and knowledge-intensive, the vast majority of those working in rural call centers are women characterized as low-skill labor.

Indeed, call centers in the rural American West are largely dependent on a feminized labor force and seek to fully reap the benefits to be had from the low-cost, often low-skill, labor pool at hand in the region. In fact, call centers in the United States with a higher percent of women in the workforce pay significantly lower wages (Batt et al, 2004, v). The use of temporary and part-time workers in call centers in the US has expanded considerably, particularly in retail and subcontracted call centers where up to 58 percent of workers are part-time or contingent (Batt et al., 2004). Not surprisingly, these are also the sectors where women are heavily concentrated. Further, retail and subcontracted call center workers earn approximately 80 percent less than IT call center workers in the United States (Batt et al., 2004).

Rural and suburban call centers in the rural American West often tap into the large numbers of female homemakers who seek to supplement household incomes or return to work after a period of absence (Gurstein, 2003). For instance, call center positions in rural communities within the American West are frequently occupied by the wives of farmers re-entering the labor market or seeking employment that provides health benefits (Wirtz, 2005; Shanley, 2005; Gurstein, 2003). Further underscoring the feminized nature of call center employment tactics, Wirtz (2005, 7) points out that two new call centers in rural Montana “inquired about proximity to military bases, hoping to tap underemployed spouses of military personnel”. Though the pay, employment shifts, and opportunities for career advancement in rural call centers are less than desirable, telework provides an attractive employment option for women seeking greater job flexibility in order to manage family and domestic obligations. This has been an important strategy for rural families, particularly in light of declining real wages and growing unemployment among men resulting from industry restructuring (Gurstein, 2003). Further, as other feminist research has importantly argued, this flexibility enables women to strategically move in and out of the workforce to supplement family incomes (e.g. Mullings, 1999).

Nonetheless, women’s labor is strategically recruited for call center work and represents a significant factor for industry location in the rural American West. However, *which* women are working in call centers in the rural American West is an important aspect for future research on this industry. How, for example, do gender dynamics collide with the politics of race, class, and sexuality to shape the industry’s labor terrain? In fact, research demonstrates that there is significant variation amongst call service labor composition. For example, the average call

center worker in the US is 30 years old with at least college education (Batt et al., 2004) By contrast, agents in outsourced call centers in the global ‘south’ tend to be in their twenties or younger and are often students or recent college graduates (Elmouldden, 2004; Belt et al., 2002). Further, industry data reveal that there are marked gender differences regarding the kinds of activities and services undertaken *within* call centers. In the US women are concentrated in the retail and financial services sectors of the call center market (Batt et al., 2004), while in India, for instance, women make up the majority of low-skill IT workers (Elmouldden, 2004). It is critical, then, to make the point that call centers exhibit gender differences in employment in all sectors and across all task areas.

Although there are important distinctions to be made about call center organizational structure and employment practices in the global ‘north’ and the global ‘south’, examining these distinctions is not my aim here. Rather, by emphasizing call centers in the American West I seek to draw attention to the parallels in the social and economic processes informing the gendered construction of call center work in the “new information economy”. I argue that “onshore” outsourced call center workers, in addition to the growing number of temporary, part-time, and home based workers in the United States, exist on a continuum with offshore call center workers. The feminization of call center work in both the global ‘north’ and the global ‘south’ involves the increase in flexible employment practices, such as temporary, part-time, and casual work. In all cases, economic restructuring and the rise of the information economy has expanded the service sector and further consolidated the gendered division of labor.

As feminists have powerfully highlighted, flexible labor is comprised predominantly of women and this dynamic is regularly justified by stereotypical perceptions of women’s roles as wives, homemakers, and caregivers (Freeman, 2000; Lawson, 1999; England, 1993). Call center work is dangerously circumscribed by such gendered assumptions: it offers flexible hours in order to meet time zone requirements (Elmouldden, 2004); it entails constant customer interaction and is undergirded by feminized notions of skill (Marshall and Richardson, 1996); and its growing dependence on part-time and home-based labor provides a “safety-net” for women whose domestic responsibilities make full-time, outside work particularly difficult (Freeman, 2000, 46). By making this claim, I do not mean to imply in any way that call center workers are homogeneous in all geographical and cultural contexts. Rather, I suggest the ways in which gender ideologies are based on essentialized notions of femininity and the structure of the information services economy intersect. In fact, by focusing on a less prominent region within call center research, I hope this paper demonstrates that differences do exist in the social and economic contexts of the call center industry.



## Conclusion

Over the course of the past two decades, new computer and teleservice technologies have loosened the spatial constraints of firm location for call centers. Concurrently, the dynamics of neoliberal restructuring and industrial decline have repatterned the economic and social outlooks of rural communities in the western United States. Services now dominate rural economic and employment bases and women are disproportionately represented within this sector of the economy. Women have played a central role in the expansion of the telecommunications industry across the continuum of call center work, both “onshore” and “offshore”, particularly because gender ideologies have constructed them as the ideal call center employee. By emphasizing the context of the rural American West, I hope to have shed light on an area not typically associated with call center expansion while demonstrating the ways in which similarly gendered logics guide firm location and hiring procedures.

Despite the dramatic proliferation of call center work, the longevity of the industry is under significant pressure. Consequently, women laboring in the call center industry are working longer hours, earning lower wages, and are employed in an increasingly volatile sector. Because women comprise a large majority of the global call center labor force, the gendered impacts of industry restructuring are substantial. Given the proliferation and dominance of the service sector both within and beyond rural communities in the American West, it is critical that we know the extent that call center services depend on female labor and a feminized market economy.

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