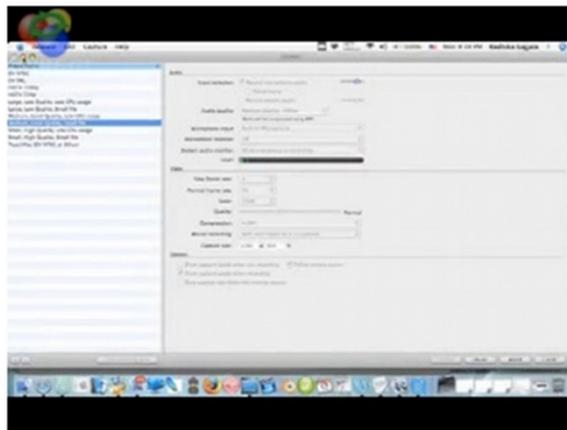


E-merging Online-Offline Practices and Identities in Global Labor and Marketing

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I start this essay by asking the reader to view a video (see video above, and also transcript below) of an interaction between my Second Life avatar and another Second Life avatar.¹ My Second Life avatar was, for a time during the

period I inhabited Second Life in 2007 in this particular form, a greeter at the jazz club in which this interaction took place. At that time, my avatar was also the owner of a sari sales business where I sold saris made from handloom cloth textures.

In the heyday of Second Life social life and business growth, mostly between 2006 and 2008, several dance clubs along various music genres were opened up in the virtual world. These clubs would use music streaming technologies, such as those offered by [SHOUTcast](#), to stream in music while avatars were invited in to dance. The owners and managers of such clubs would employ greeters, security guards, and other staff. Greeters were avatars that would make sure that customers felt welcome. They also carried around “tip jars” so that visiting avatars could pay them small Linden (the currency of Second Life) amounts as tips if they felt like it. Security guards watched to see that there was no harassment, spamming, or hacking happening in the environment. Each of these jobs required the ability to perform specific technical and social tasks within and to translate offline knowledge to the online club environment. Owning a clothes business also required specific technical and cultural skills so that clothes could be designed for wear by the avatars. However, the business practices and social codes within each context evolved through the continued interaction of the participants involved based on the offline sociocultural contexts that the online club theme was drawn from, and in the ever increasing technical possibilities of the software and hardware that made the virtual world possible. Thus, each club, as an intersection of online and offline practices and knowledge, developed as a unique social place in the virtual world.

In this particular video, my avatar is dancing with another avatar but also conversing through the text chat box, where I am typing “in character.” I ask that you look closely at what is going on here: what might I learn about selling within a virtual world? How is this similar or different from selling in our offline contexts? What elements here are “global” and what elements are situated in particular localized contexts? How is the act of translation becoming possible at all? If the end result of this interaction is the sale of a product—virtual or offline—with the use of actual money that has real world exchange value, then what might we label this particular event? Marketing?

Transcript of the video (names not revealed to maintain confidentiality):

BvA : want to dance with me?

rZ: sure!

...

BvA: are you Indian?

rZ: yes

....

rZ: very pretty outfit

BvA: I find a shop with Indian outfit

rZ: well you are beautiful

BvA: we look like old women? ^^

rZ: I am almost

BvA: I have japonese wietnames formal and other outfit

rZ: will come and check it out

BvA: we are woman we love to be nice

rZ: not all women are nice

BvA: yes not all

....

Rz smiles

BvA: I want try sary you give me

Rz: okay let me give it to you so you can try it now

---BvA accepts inventory item----

rZ : then we can be twins in saris!

What we learn from the above exchange is not just, “w00t,² I can now make a ton of money in Linden dollars” (which, when exchanged into US dollars, might be a measly dollar or two). We learn that there are tacit social relationship practices and aesthetic values taken into online environments from multiple offline locations. We learn that marketing online is very similar to marketing offline as we develop specific producer-consumer relationships

in an effort to sell. Producers learn to link a consumer base to a producer community. Economic ties are built through social and aesthetic desire. But can this happen—as is often implied and celebrated in net cultures—individual to individual? I think not.

Globalization processes include material and discursive hegemonies produced at the intersection of the economic, the cultural, and the social, and they are mediated in multiple ways through old and new mediascapes in changing industrial landscapes and modes of production.³ These processes feed into local economic and cultural formations. Global technospaces are produced through and are a consequence of economic globalization. For instance, digital diasporas from regions such as South Asia are a product of transnational commerce.⁴ The theoretical lenses for engaging these contexts continue to be developed.

The present exploratory essay is based mostly in the claim that online presences and absences are shaped by the marketing and laboring needs of this e-merging global digital economy.⁵ I posit that current forms of online networks and communities are not only transitional, but that the transitional, shifting, updating nature of these networks, technologies, spaces and places in itself is the condition upon which this global marketing process relies. The continual production of newness generates continuous consumption while at the same time stabilizing sociocultural, economic, and aesthetic standards within the online virtual worlds and social networks that potentially form a basis for future global business (management, advertising, and labor) practices both online and offline.

This global standardization for laboring in and for the sociocultural inhabitation of such virtual environments happens in layered ways in which various separations—de-linkings—feed into the process of newness in Internet-mediated globalization. These continual de-linkings rely on ongoing processes of de-skilling and re-skilling that contribute to the transitional nature of the labor force that helps to produce these environments. Such de-linkings also result in labor and management structures that disappear particular laboring bodies and make visible other bodies and products for consumption. Black and brown bodies at the computer interface, for instance,

are produced as simultaneously uplifted through Internet technologies and modernity and subordinate to a status quo that privileges whiteness and a mostly Western-centric development.⁶

Colonialism openly set in motion a logical force that justified the global circulation of resources for consumption by the few. Soon enough, the masters of industry realized they were producing more than the elite few could consume and learned they could sell more in the name of sharing and providing empowerment. The global circulation of raw material and labor was the basis for the industrialization of the Western worlds. In current manifestations of globalization, neoliberal logics reframe the hidden logic of colonialism in terms of increased access and opportunity. Thus we are offered increased access and opportunity to consume and we work to consume, while the management of labor, skills, literacies, and modes of production, as well as the circulation and flow of capital, are still controlled through particular socioeconomic hierarchies. We are told how empowered we are to be able to consume and to labor in Internet-mediated environments as we “flexibly” multitask, opening windows for shopping, coding, grading, instructing, learning, writing papers, banking, giving charity online, sharing hobbies, daily sweet nothings, and even providing sexual pleasure.

In actuality, this so-called consumer empowerment is the product of a continually transitioning labor force. The global modes of consumption that online networking and virtual world contexts encourage give rise to a “transitional labor market.”⁷ The concept of a transitional labor market describes an emerging labor force that comes to expect and experiences an increasing number of transitions during their working career as a consequence of intertwined economic and social trends. Such trends include shifts in production, marketing, and management processes as well as moves to digitalize financial systems, standardize management and marketing processes, and recruit subaltern populations into global labor forces. These trends are shaped by neoliberal economic policies that privilege modern markets as the main mechanisms for producing economic development, and increased consumption, which motivates mass production and competitive marketing. Transitions from one job to another, and transitions between

work and home, education, and unemployment are expected. This transitioning is viewed as “worker flexibility” by some and has been described in positive terms as “opportunity.” On the other hand, this transitional/transiting labor force can also be characterized by the term “precarious labor,”⁸ which describes conditions in which the individual increasingly bears the risk of a “flexible” labor market with reduced medical and other benefits, reduced job security, and so on. The transitional workforce is based on a feminizing of labor that in fact has produced different layers of transnational, low-income, women’s labor and continues to do so. Parallel to this are burgeoning transitional spaces formed through the precarious labor of activists and non-profit volunteers, such as online NGO spaces for the informal training and intellectualizing of subaltern populations, providing them with the access and empowerment to perform various tasks in the emerging global digital economy and thus form a part of the transitional labor force.⁹ The conceptualization of such NGO labor as precarious draws on feminist extensions of notions of immaterial, free, digital and consumer labor articulated by scholars such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt.¹⁰ Such workers play a crucial role in helping the transition to “globalization” in various ways. For instance, they help to develop global labor practices and to co-create communicative processes and work environments.

Transitional labor forces emerge within online worlds for periods of time when workers re-skill themselves technically, socially, and culturally in order to participate in the global marketplace. It is within such transitional places that they not only learn the skills to participate in emerging global economic formations, they also learn to co-build such environments and learn how to buy, sell, re-skill, and cater to the needs of the economically and culturally hegemonic socio-cultures framing globalization. We see evidence of this happening in open source communities and networks and even in Wikipedia discussions. My research in Second Life with Indian communities, formed around Bollywood music and Indian fashion, also provides evidence of this.¹¹ However, in the process of workers’ incorporation into the global online-offline marketplace, there is a shift to appropriate practices (“best practices”) that result in and produce hegemonically desirable shifts in consumption patterns (increased sales, for instance).¹²

Identities produced within digital contexts enabled by computer software and hardware are made possible through social networks formed online and offline as well as through the coproduction of digital global networks involving time-space compression.¹³ Social network systems, MMORPGs, game consoles, locative media, emotion mapping, and related ubiquitous static and migratory technologies and their archives remap temporal and spatial relationships while producing specific modes of mobility and immobility based in a producer-consumer continuum. This continuum is hardly smooth and fluid—it is jagged and mediated by multiple hierarchies of labor, management, marketing and finance. At this point, I suppose I could introduce the term prosumer to describe these consuming producers and producing consumers. However, since the term prosumer—drawn from Alvin Toffler’s book on the “Third Wave”¹⁴—actually indicates more active production on the part of the consumer than the present-day producer-consumer continuum allows, I will stay with the term coproducer with the understanding that the prefix of “co” in no way implies equal laboring or equal power on the part of the consumer (who coproduces) or the laborer/producer (who co-consumes). In this continuum of work, the laborer/producer, who is not the primary designer or manager, has less pleasurable options and choices in the production process than the consuming coproducer who is working to consume with a certain degree of satisfaction and pleasure even as s/he coproduces to consume. The sociocultural literacies of these inhabitants, which include producing co-consumers and consuming coproducers, determine the kinds of labor they contribute towards the building of these digitally enabled online-offline global spaces/networks. The continued inhabiting of these spaces leads to a reorganization of social space and everyday practice similar to that experienced by call center workers from India who are tuned in to time zones and cultural practices in the Western worlds, as described by Ananda Mitra in his work on workers in outsourced call centers.¹⁵ These workers experience a social, affective transformation that orients them towards life in global multicultural communities.

Contexts for the productive labor forces that I describe here emerge at the interface of technologies “old” and “new.” For instance, when value is

assigned to particular craft products in ostensibly hypermodern digital spaces such as Second Life, it is determined by invoking contemporary everyday needs, global ideologies, and fashion discourse, rather than through the reinstating of what are thought to be traditional cultural dress codes. Thus, for instance, an Indian sari that is made with fabric woven using a hand loom in a village in south India has to be reinvented in modern fashion circles if the producer is to increase sales. This might be done by redesigning the product for modern wear and by having the product modeled by glamorous Bollywood stars or prominent female politicians, rather than sold as the correct garb for particular religious and social rituals considered to be outdated and/or traditional.¹⁶ This also means that we should examine labor, race, gender, and class in relation to specific geographical contexts and in relation to global production. In current forms of globalization, consumption is decentralized—but not the ownership of business and of modes of production. This is exactly why, as Toby Miller notes, it is not enough for cultural studies and communication scholars just to write and “learn a lot about prosumers.”¹⁷ We need to examine the specifics of production and use, and the geographically contextual ways in which producers “diversify” to reach consumers—and how, in that process, labor from multiple locations is re-skilled and mobilized in an effort to maintain the producer-centric hegemony within current modes of globalization.

Even in talking about the digital labor of gamers from offline Third World locations, we need to be aware of the ways in which a game producer such as Blizzard Entertainment might cater to very specifically different cultural contexts of literacies and skills based in geography, politics, economics, language, generation, and attitudes to work and play.¹⁸ But we also need to be aware of how the very virtual world, through gaming rules and standard practices based in the logic of the game, is standardizing specific responses within the internal logics of the game storyline, tasks, visual aesthetics, and so on. These too are continually “upgraded” in an effort to recruit more and more users worldwide, but the platform, even as it upgrades, provides the standard for engagement. Thus, we need to be very cautious about generalizing based on what we recognize from other contexts when we appear to see evidence or reproductions of existing offline practices, such as geographical configurations of labor, when we examine different forms of

visible labor (be it the labor of Chinese gold farmers or that of the fan communities that draw on the game context to produce related content for further circulation).

Through an examination of the ways in which labor and capital flows circulate in these digitally enabled online-offline spaces, we can see the contingencies that produce specific places as sometimes global and sometimes local. In all of these contexts, the production and marketing of the products involves locally and globally relational placements of productive labor online and offline in relation to consumer communities and cultures. There is an understanding of the (im)possibility of cross-context flows that we encounter when we engage in the practical exercise of trying to market products that are very particularly situated and radically context-based (spatiotemporally) in their use and aesthetics. This is the case whether we are talking about a “traditional” Indian sari (design and/or cloth) or about “postmodern” virtual artifacts with real money value in Second Life or World of Warcraft. In the case of the traditional Indian sari, it is an artifact situated in a very particular logic of production and consumption based in everyday, communal sociocultural and economic practices in the Indian context. It derives value from its uses in this context. Its value is produced contextually through its use within the specific, everyday social logics of the community.

In the case of a virtual artifact produced within a virtual world that becomes “real” through “real money transactions” (RMT), the virtual artifact has value within the sociocultural and economic logics of gamers and others who inhabit such virtual environments. The value is produced through the logics internal to the virtual world and is specifically understood only by the groups of people who inhabit the virtual world either through gaming or social networking. In both cases, there is an intricate layering of sociocultural, economic, and technical skills and literacies involved in the production of the artifact and in the value attributed to the object, as well as to the actual labor of production. The video that I began this article with is meant to be viewed in such a framing. Such intersections produce very specific situated contexts for productive labor forces to emerge at the interface of technologies “old” and “new.” These situated contexts place the individual in relation to market forces and community production logics, through which laboring is shaped

by affective economies and communities.¹⁹ Labor forces, in turn, are uprooted, made mobile in their pursuit of wages, and placed in networks in which continual re-skilling becomes a condition of the everyday within hierarchies of digital globalization.²⁰

Notes

- 1 Second Life is an online virtual world. For more information, see <http://www.secondlife.com>.
- 2 <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=woot>.
- 3 Arjun Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard Gabriel Fox (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991), 191-210.
- 4 Radhika Gajjala, "Placing South Asian Digital Diasporas in Secondlife," in *The Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication*, ed. Rona Tamiko Halualani and Thomas K. Nakayama (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 517-534.
- 5 "E-merging" in that not only are global digital economies emerging in and through "E" space but they are also continually merging to become in global formations.
- 6 See Martin Kevorkian, *Color Monitors: The Black Face of Technology in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).
- 7 Günther Schmid, *Transitional Labour Markets: A New European Employment Strategy* (Berlin: WZB, Forschungsschwerpunkt Arbeitsmarkt und Beschäftigung, 1998).
- 8 Clara Olmedo and Martin J. Murray, "The Formalization of Informal/Precarious Labor in Contemporary Argentina," *International Sociology* 17, no. 3 (2002): 421-43.
- 9 See Aradhana Sharma, *Logics of Empowerment: Development, Gender, and Governance in Neoliberal India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
- 10 Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- 11 Gajjala, "Placing South Asian Digital Diasporas."

- 12 For some examples on how these are developing in relation Web 2.0, see <http://www.forrester.com/rb/search/results.jsp?SortType=Date&dAg=10000&N=51383+133001+50176>.
- 13 Here, I do not merely refer to web 2.0 based social networking systems and virtual worlds online but to social networks and virtual communities formed across generations of Internet use.
- 14 Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Morrow, 1980).
- 15 Ananda Mitra "Working in Cybernetic Space: Diasporic Indian Call Center Workers in the Outsourced World," in *South Asian Technospaces*, ed. Radhika Gajjala and Venkataramana Gajjala (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 205-224 .
- 16 This was how it would have been sold in previous generations where each type of sari weave was recognized in relation to specific ritual or social contexts based on the everyday practices of that time. The customer would also go to the weaver/producer in person and give feedback about the design based on her socicultural, economic, and aesthetic needs.
- 17 Toby Miller, "My Global Financial Crisis," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (2010): 432-438.
- 18 See work by Julian Dibbel and Edward Castranova for work specifically about virtual (gaming) economies, markets, and labor. Edward Castranova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business of Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Julian Dibbell, *Play Money: Or How I Quit My Day Job And Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
- 19 The notion of affective communities is take from Leela Gandhi's work and the notion of affective economies is taken from Sara Ahmed's work. Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); and Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 121-139.
- 20 Radhika Gajjala, "Snapshots from Sari Trails: Cyborgs Old and New," in *Social Identities* (forthcoming 2011).

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