Chapter Five

Chained to the Dialer, or Frederick Taylor Reaches Out and Touches Someone

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When I graduated from college with my bachelor's degree, I couldn't buy a job. I had done my own television show for almost two years and I couldn't get a job as a tour guide at a television station. Then again, the economy in Oregon at the time was lousy, so lots of people were having the same problem. I joked with my girlfriend that I would work for Satan if he paid $10/hour. I finally got a job at a large bank in the collections department. It paid well enough that I could pay my student loans and cover rent, but my food budget was pretty tight. It was a job, but while I wasn't actually working for Satan, I was pretty sure he was on the board of directors.

My job consisted of telling people that they were behind on their credit cards and finding out why. My performance was based entirely on whether or not people could pay their minimum payment and bring the card up to date. I talked to people who were too clueless to realize that if they had a fixed income (a favorite excuse from the retired set), they probably shouldn't charge $1,000 in a month. I also talked to people who were dying of cancer and had lost their jobs. The reasons ran the gamut. But that wasn't the worst part of my job, although it did take an emotional toll. No, the worst part of my job was Mosaix, or the automatic dialer that I was connected to. Mosaix would call the cardholder and tell them to hold for an important message and I would hear a beep and, hopefully, the cardholder information would pop up on my computer screen. There I would sit, day after day, for a year and a half, connected to my computer by the cord to my headset. My coworkers and I often remarked that we were chained to the dialer.

WELCOME TO THE MACHINE

For most people living in modern society, interaction with call centers is an inevitable part of life. People complain about the labyrinth of phone trees that keep you from getting to a live person and the vaguely Indian accent of the customer service representative who insists that his name is "John." Indeed, call centers have even begun to seep into Indian popular culture, likely because of the seeming ubiquity of the industry (Lakshman 2006). But call centers are alive and well all over the world and, despite considerable research (mostly in trying to discover how to reduce burnout or increase efficiency), few scholars have examined call centers by actually working in one.

This chapter draws extensively on my own experience. Autoethnography is a form of critical self-reflection that allows the researcher to closely examine his or her own experience. The goal is understanding, rather than generalizability (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Hughes (2008) suggests that "Rather than seeking to escape subjectivity, authors considering autoethnographic techniques should do so precisely because of the qualitative genre's capacity to engage first person voice, and to embrace the conflict of writing against oneself" (128). The goal is to provide the kind of "thick description" described by Clifford Geertz, while, to some extent, overcoming the ethnographer's problem that "we are not actors, we do not have direct access, but only that small part of it which our informants can lead us into understanding" (Geertz 1973, 20).

To engage in autoethnography requires that the researcher take the epistemological stance that reality is defined by the individual actors. This social construction of reality is largely done through the sharing of narratives; as Fisher (1984) put it, "recounting and accounting for are stories we tell ourselves and each other to establish a meaningful life world" (6). But stories are subject to change, even in the minds of the participants. We are all unreliable narrators of our own life stories. This is an accepted part of autoethnography; as Ellis (2004) explains in her work, "My current frames of memory—and my need to have a coherent sense of myself—influenced what I remembered and what the memories meant to me" (117). Elsewhere, Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that "stories rearrange, redescribe, invent, omit and revise. . . . A story is not a neutral attempt to mirror the facts of one's life; it does not seek to recover already constituted meanings" because "the meanings and significance of the past are incomplete, tentative, and revisable according to contingencies of our present life circumstances, the present from which we narrate" (745). With this as an epistemological starting point, Denzin (2014) suggests that "the goal is not to produce a standard social science article. The goal is to write performance texts in a way that moves others to ethical action" (70). As such, the researcher need not rely on field notes or detailed journals as one would expect in traditional ethnography (Wall 2008). Al-

though this subjectivity is one of the perils of autoethnography, it is no less the case in empirical research where individuals may seek to portray themselves in a more favorable light to the researcher or even to themselves (Lee and Woodliffe 2010; Nederhof 1985; Tourangeau and Yan 2007). Also, it's much more fun to write and read stories than sterile academic prose. As Bochner (2012) puts it, "If we experience our lives as stories, then why not represent them as stories?" (157).

Autoethnography has often been used to explore issues about which research participants may find it difficult to open up (e.g., Grant 2010; Lahman 2009; Pelias 2006; Speedy 2013; Tillmann 2009). As such, it is imperative that the researcher work to protect the unwitting individuals who may find themselves involved in the study merely by being a part of the researcher's life. Thus, I have avoided clearly identifying my colleagues and do not reveal the name of the bank or its location. The researcher must also work to protect him or herself (Chatham-Carpenter 2013). Even when the researcher has some critical distance from the phenomenon that he or she wishes to engage, the emotions that are dredged up from that time can be painful and raw. As Ellis (2004) explains, "I delve into my memory, putting myself back in the scene that took place. . . . Then I search for words to describe the feelings running through me" (133). These narratives can be powerfully emotional; something that is often missing in academic scholarship. For example, I found myself struggling to hold back tears when reading Weaver-Hightower's (2012) explorations of his feelings on having a stillborn daughter. The researcher may also need to come to terms with occasions in which they did not behave in the best possible way. Researchers are human and may behave in ways that are petty, shameful, or destructive—both to themselves and to others.

Uotinen (2010) argues that, when done well, "autoethnography offers a possibility to connect the individual and general, and to consider the meanings and consequences of the technological society at the level of everyday practices" (167). For my purposes, autoethnography allows me to explore more fully the multiple ways in which working in a call center is dehumanizing. Foremost among these is the removal of agency. My role was as an "outbound" collections agent, which meant that I called the customers directly, in contrast to "inbound" agents who received calls directly from customers. But to say that "I" called the customers overlooks a key element in this system—Mosaix. My calls were dialed by this automatic dialer program; I had no control over who I would call or when. Once I had completed a call I would write notes on the account, providing such information as why they had not paid on time, when they would pay, how much they would pay, and by what means the payment would come. After this moment of silence, I would release the file and wait for the beep and the screen change that would signal a new call. Each collections agent was then evaluated on their success

in collecting money from the customers that had been randomly selected for them by the computerized system. "Inbound" collections agents likewise had a queue of callers who were returning our calls after we left messages for the customer. During this process, there was potential for covert surveillance by our supervisor who may be listening in on our calls. Secondly, dealing with customers only in a mediated environment allowed us to forget about the humanity of the individuals with whom we spoke. As a result, we became rude, abrupt, and, at times, downright abusive to the customers. A recent case of a Comcast employee that was posted widely on the Internet illustrates that this may not be an isolated occurrence. In that case, Comcast apologized publicly while privately acknowledging that "the agent on this call did a lot of what we trained and paid him—and thousands of other Retention agents— to do" (Brodkin 2014). I should be grateful, I suppose, that I worked in the industry before the age of social media because any one of us could have been that hapless employee. Some of the language in the vignettes may seem jarring; my desire is not to shock the reader, but rather to illustrate how many of us really thought of the customers. Both of these dimensions—remote control and mediated interaction—call into question the often celebratory discourse surrounding information work.

The experiences I will recount are well removed from my current life, but I still remember it vividly. There is something particularly troubling about calling people who are down on their luck and telling them that they need to send the bank money. Although I recognized that they owed money to the bank, it felt like my soul was slowly being drained from my body. It is not something that you easily forget. There was also the realization that I was inextricably connected with the technological apparatus that drove the enterprise, but that I was in no way in control. As Postman (1993) observed, "computers do no work; they direct work" (115). I was, in all ways, an agent of the dialer; the dialer was not my tool—I was a tool of the dialer.

As Hegel (1994) observed in his discussion of the master/slave dialectic, the master is "an existent-for-self-consciousness that is mediated with itself through another consciousness" (58). It is still difficult to determine who was master and who was slave in the transaction: me or the dialer. As Hegel's discussion suggests, we both needed each other to some extent but, at the risk of anthropomorphizing the dialer, I had little choice but to be a slave to the dialer and the dialer had little choice but to rely on me to talk to the customers it called. Perhaps we were simply cogs in a larger system in which we were both used as tools of management. Still, it was precisely this slave consciousness that allowed me some degree of freedom. In Hegel's dialectic, the catalyst of this consciousness is absolute, total fear, but this possibility was short circuited by virtue of my master's physical limitations. Of course there were actual, living people listening in on my calls who wrote my performance reviews, but the intermediary of Mosaix kept them one step

removed from my everyday experience. As such, my colleagues and I were able to usurp some degree of power from the dialer through various acts of resistance.

EMOTIONAL LABOR IN THE PANOPTICON

The trainer in our class told us that if we had a short temper, we probably wouldn't do well in collections. I hit it off with the trainer when he saw me reading the book *Sabotage in the American Workplace* and introduced me to the underground magazine *Temp Slave*. Needless to say, we both had a rebellious bent, despite his role as a trainer. Turns out that in the class before mine a guy had totally freaked out on a cardholder. As he became more agitated, he suddenly started shouting, "Fuck ME? FUCK YOU! You're going to pay everything or we're going to come get you!" He finished the call with everyone staring at him, put down his headset, and said, "I don't think I'm cut out for this." Everyone who heard this story said that if they were going to bail, that was how they wanted to go out. I agreed, but didn't quite have the guts to do it. When I got a new job and had to wait my two weeks to leave, I did, however, get a bit more brutal with the cardholders. After all, what were they going to do to me? Fire me?

My favorite moment of defiance came when a cardholder asked me, "Do you know how much money I have in your bank?" I replied, "Hold on a second and I can find out. Yes, you have $10,867.52." She was aghast: "How do you know how much I have in the bank? I'LL HAVE YOUR JOB!" I explained to her that I was an employee of the bank and had access to her accounts and offered to transfer the minimum payment to bring her card up to date. She refused and told me that I had to reverse all of the fees and the marks on her credit report. I told her that I couldn't do anything if she wasn't going to make a payment. She asked to be transferred to my supervisor and I asked if she would be making a payment to him. She said no and I told her that I wasn't going to waste his time, since the whole point of collections was to get the account current. She was pissed and hung up. I documented the account in record time and noted that she had refused to make a payment and to not reverse any fees or marks on her credit report. When I went on break I talked to one of the inbound collections agents.

"Hey Brett, I got one of your pissed off customers."

"Did you reverse any fees?"

"Hell no!"

We had a good laugh over her. I had actually submitted the card to be closed due to collections, which would have put another negative mark on her credit report, but my supervisor wouldn't do it. "Anyway," he told me,

"It's eighty-seven days past due. If she mails in a payment it will be at ninety days and get shut down anyway. Less paperwork."

I sat next to a guy named Goldhammer. He definitely enjoyed his work, or at least made the most of a lousy situation. To say he was abusive to the cardholders would be generous. Needless to say, he became our anti-hero. In fact, his name became a verb—"Dude! You totally Goldhammered that guy!"—or an adjective—"I totally went Goldhammer on her." Sitting next to him was a challenge because he expressed all of the things we wished that we could say.

One time he called a student card (credit cards marketed mainly to college students) and the cardholder asked what she wanted him to do. He went down her statement and said "Take back what you bought at Victoria's Secret and tell them you can't afford it. Take back what you bought at the Gap and tell them you can't afford it. Take back what you bought at Wet Seal and tell them you can't afford it." I had to put my phone on mute to laugh while someone gave me a sob story about why they couldn't make their payment. He eventually got fired for being too abusive to the cardholders and the complaint that did him in wasn't even his best work. After all, we were told that we were to act like customer service representatives, despite the fact that for defaulted cards (which we generally got in collections) the bank saw them as such a risk that they closed the cards and jacked the rate up to 24.9 percent APR. Obviously they cared about keeping these customers happy.

Emotional labor, or the managing of natural, authentic feelings in order to display those sanctioned by the organization, is a major component of call center work. In some ways, you are expected to behave like a robot, even down to the script. In fact, it would be quite easy to replace a collections agent with an automated system: "Why have you missed your payment? Press one if you've recently lost your job; press two if you have enrolled with Consumer Credit Counseling Services and they have taken over your payments; press three if you did not get the bill and forgot. . . ." But the one thing that can't be automated is the idea of customer service. Indeed, Marks (2013) reports that "when *Consumer Reports* polled shoppers nationwide to gauge what customer service problems they found most annoying, the inability to get a human on the phone topped the list. That was followed closely by rudeness and the prospect of wading through arcane phone menus" (7). So the human element is still an essential part of the service transaction, even in the collections arena.

This emotional labor can take a serious toll on job satisfaction, turnover rates, job performance, and one's relationships outside of work (Hochschild 1983; see also, Buckner and Mahoney 2012; Lam and Chen 2012; Medler-Liraz 2014; Sanz-Vergel, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Bakker, and Demerouti 2012). Managing emotions can even take a physical toll. In an experiment in a simulated call center environment, Rohrmann, Bechtoldt, Hopp, Hodapp,

and Zapf (2011) found that "subjects adhering to emotional display rules revealed higher heart rates, higher increases in diastolic blood pressure, and they were verbally less fluent while interacting with a customer" (433). The researchers note that this is amplified in individuals who exhibit higher trait anger. The surface acting and deep acting required in emotional labor can impact the organization through increased turnover and lower employee performance. Bayram, Aytac, and Dursun (2012) found that "employees hiding the emotions they actually feel while offering service increase their emotional exhaustion levels," and that these actions can contribute to employee burnout (304). A study by Goodwin, Groth, and Frenkel (2011) also suggests that "if employees do not feel the emotions required of them in their interactions with customers, engaging in surface acting may lead to inconsistent or insincere interpersonal displays of these desired emotions, resulting in reduced service performance" (544). Indeed, Goodwin, Groth, and Frenkel (2011) found that "surface acting decreases the likelihood of desirable emotional expression within customer service interactions, and, in highly interactive customer service jobs such as that of call center agents, affective delivery seems to be an important predictor of a service agent's overall job performance" (544).

Such emotional labor is mandatory in a call center environment where the collections agent may be monitored at any moment. The call center environment would seem to provide an excellent illustration of panoptic control. Bentham (1791) proposed a model for a circular prison called a panopticon, in which guards were stationed in a darkened tower and prisoners were housed in always illuminated cells surrounding the tower (for critical discussion on the panopticon, see Foucaul 1995, 195–228). The panopticon works as a tool of surveillance not because individuals are actually under surveillance, but because of the *potential* of being under surveillance (Elmer 2003, 232–33; see also, Campbell and Carlson 2002; Elmes, Strong, and Volkoff 2005; Green 1999). In a call center, one manages emotions not because of a desire to make a good impression, but rather because failing to do so may result in losing his or her job. Lyon (1994) notes that "Bentham planned his Panopticon as a centerpiece of his aggressively secularist approach to policy," with the inspector "a parody of God" (205). But Lyon argues that surveillance need not be negative, contrasting Bentham and Foucault's accusatory view of the panopticon with the ideals of pastoral care and looking out for others suggested in Psalm 139, part of which is used as an epigraph in Bentham's treatise (205–12).[1] In the case of bureaucratic control, it seems that only the negative aspects of surveillance remain. Despite the stated goal of helping us to become better collections agents, it felt punitive in practice. Only once was I told by management that I was doing something well, and that was because a cardholder had specifically asked to speak to my supervisor because I was the first collections agent who had treated her with respect

and human dignity. Our reviews mostly focused on things we were not doing as well as management would like.

The difference between the prisoners in Bentham's hypothetical prison and call center employees is that the stakes are much lower and the number of guards is always known. My supervisor was the one monitoring my calls, so on my team of almost twenty, the odds were pretty good that on a given call I would not be the one monitored at a given time, especially with Goldhammer riding shotgun in the cube next to me. Such instances of calculated risk allowed us to get away with more than we would have had we been audited by some external force. We knew from Goldhammer's example that one could push a bit and still get away with it for a while at least. If one were caught, he or she may dial it back a bit, much as a person who was just busted for speeding may slow down—for a while.

It seems that even with surveillance, some of us had little desire to manage our emotions. This may have less to do with a desire to abuse people and more to do with the fact that through mediation it is easier to see these individuals as objects rather than as people. For example, many scholars have explored the link between computer mediated communication and aggressive behavior toward others that one would likely not engage in during a face-to-face interaction (Avgerinakou 2003; Benson 1996; Joinson 2007; O'Sullivan and Flanagin 2003; Suler 2004; Turnage 2007; Vrooman 2002). Others have observed how violent language has become normalized in current political discourse that dehumanizes others through abstraction (Benson 2011; Lunceford 2011). This dehumanization through mediation can have drastic consequences. Some scholars have examined the mediated nature of postmodern warfare and found that mediation removes the immediacy of death (Adams and Barrie 2013; Royakkers and van Est 2010; Wall and Monahan 2011). In their discussion of the first Gulf War, Robins and Levidow (1995) write,

> Killing is done "at a distance," through technological mediation, without the shock of direct confrontation. The victims become psychologically invisible. The soldier appears to achieve a moral dissociation; the targeted "things" on the screen do not seem to implicate him in a moral relationship. (120)

As one drone pilot puts it, "Killing people is like squashing an ant. I mean, you kill somebody and it's like 'All right, let's go get some pizza'" (quoted in Singer 2009, 392). Another said, "It's like a video game. It can get a little bloodthirsty. But it's fucking cool" (quoted in Singer 2009, 308–9). Stahl (2010) likewise explores the gamification of modern military actions and notes that this has seeped over into public consciousness. Stahl states that in "gun sight videos" released by the Pentagon depicting the killing of individuals on the ground, "the very presence of dying human beings suggests that

the viewership at large had begun to overcome a long-standing aversion" (44). When dealing with individuals at a distance, it is easier to ignore their humanity, to forget that they are actual people who possess feelings and have worth. In our case, it was also easy to forget that someone may be listening in on the line and that there was an actual, living person on the other end of our call.

Panoptic control is, therefore, not absolute, nor does it always work. Lyon (1994) suggests that "direct attempts at greater management control over workers, using surveillance data, may be counterproductive in that they generate resistance" (132). Boyne (2000) likewise observes that panoptic control has failed to "produce reliably docile subjects" (285), and this was certainly the case in our call center with Goldhammer serving as an exemplar of this counter-tendency. Other scholars have suggested that there is potential for resistance specifically within call centers. Bain and Taylor (2000) describe instances in which panoptic control may break down because of the ways that call center agents can game the system (12–13). One such instance for us was the use of skip-trace jobs, or instances when we would be asked to track down delinquent cardholders for whom we had no valid contact information. These jobs usually took place when the dialer was not operating correctly. For many of us, this was an opportunity to slow down and, in some cases, completely shirk our responsibility. One of my co-workers tracked down people he knew from his home town that he had lost contact with. Another way that we would resist the relentless dialer was simply to log off to go to the bathroom. It was a commonly accepted practice that if you had to defecate, you definitely did not do so during your fifteen minute break. When I told my brother this, he said that when he was working in a call center as a tech support representative, their motto was "always shit on company time."

I would like to pause to unpack this expression, because there are multiple layers worth considering. There is the obvious: use the restroom strategically as a way to get an extra break. However, there is also the deeper level of resistance against the very idea of "company time" and a tacit understanding that the employer cannot completely regulate the body of the worker. Only the worker knows if he or she is acting in good faith. When a New Hampshire court ruled that prison inmates who were throwing feces, urine, and other bodily fluids at prison workers constituted assault, the inmates began simply "throwing feces and urine on the jail floor for corrections staff to remove" (N. H. Court to Rule 2010). Rhodes (1998) explains that

> from this phenomenological perspective on the danger the panopticon represents to the prisoner's sense of bodily integrity, shit-throwing makes a certain sense. It affirms the body of the prisoner as his own, and claims it as a territory to be appropriated in the only way possible, to be mined for weapons, as it were. (297)

In a similar manner, logging off to use the restroom affirms the body as one's own; the employer can pay for one's labor, but cannot completely control the worker's body. To attempt to do so would violate far too many taboos in society concerning excrement. Were the employer to tell the employee that he or she could not use the restroom, they would enter into a game of chicken that would certainly backfire if the employee were to make good on the threat. As such, individuals can leverage their bodily functions as a means of resistance.

One day, during break, we had a realization. College degrees really weren't going to get you a decent job. At least not in the fields in which we chose to study. "He has a degree in anthropology, she has a degree in sociology, you have a degree in communication. Hell, there's a guy in back-end collections with a JD. What the hell are we all doing here?" It was true. We didn't just represent the liberal arts. There were people with business degrees and the like, mingled with people who had this as their first job out of high school.

For most of us, it was really just a means to an end, and that end was eating and keeping a roof over our heads. Some saw it as a way to pay for the things they really enjoyed doing. One of my colleagues was heavy into gambling. He would save up all year and then go spend two weeks in Vegas. When he wasn't at work he was probably at the dog track betting on the greyhounds or betting on sporting events. But he was a methodical gambler—not reckless at all. He was the kind of guy who would say "I don't think they'll beat the spread because number 27 is out with a torn ACL." Another guy was saving up enough to go live with his aunt in Italy. I asked if he could speak Italian and he admitted that he could not. When I asked what he would do once his savings ran out he replied, "Probably the same thing that people who can't speak English do here—be a garbage man or a landscaper or something." I had to admit that it was better than the job that we were doing and at least he would be a garbage man in Italy.

Our experience of perceived downward social mobility was hardly novel. In fact, it seems that this may be a global phenomenon. Matos (2012) found that Portuguese call center workers experienced a sense of shame and resentment over their inability to move up in social class. In her study, despite half of the workers having or working on university degrees, they described call center work not as a choice, but "regarded it as the only option of employment available" (Matos 2012, 231). Call center work is becoming increasingly common, especially among the newly graduated. But this is not what they set out to do. This is a problem for the employees, the call center managers, and those who call in to those centers. Brick (2011) notes that "Managing or working in a contact center professionally requires a certain skill set. . . . It's really not practical to assume that you can ask people who work in the field or face-to-face with clients one day to put on a headset and start answering

calls successfully the next" (36). Yet this is what call center workers do. We had two weeks of training, one of which consisted of taking live collection calls.

But who would actually want to develop the skills needed for call center work? Working at a call center is a lousy job no matter where you are. In a survey of call center supervisors in Spain, Valverde, Ryan, and Gorjup (2007) found that "Only 14.6 percent of the sample (made up of just six call centers) offer high quality jobs," based on criteria including salary, job stability, access to continuous training and career development, and contract type (temporary or permanent) (154). Scholarios and Taylor (2010) suggest that women have it particularly bad in call centers, finding that

> women's progression within call centres suffers as a result of organisational and domestic constraints, as well as the conjuncture of labour market opportunity offered by this new sector and limited availability of jobs at particular times. Career opportunities are circumscribed, and escape routes from the phones are themselves genderised. (113)

Hechanova (2013) found that despite having significantly higher wages, Filipino call center workers experienced significant work/life conflict; "The crux of the tension between culture and work practice is that agents are unable to spend time and celebrate significant events with their families or participate in faith-related activities—all of which are important aspects of who they are" (360). One also cannot take a "one size fits all" approach to surveillance; Panina and Aiello (2005) suggest that culture plays a part in how such surveillance is perceived. Some cultures are more open to such intrusion if they can see some benefit in enhancing their performance, for example. Others are much more resistant.

No one wants to grow up to be a call center employee. It is, almost by definition, the kind of job one takes out of necessity. It seems to marry the worst of all possible worlds. If you're an introvert, imagine being required to talk to many hostile individuals every day. If you're an extrovert, imagine not being able to talk to the person sitting next to you every day. Like solving problems? Never mind, they give you a script and a highly constrained set of procedures. As Winner (1997) notes, people in many information economy jobs sit at their terminals in windowless rooms and share "the experience of imposed solutions, of being receptacles for patterns and processes whose character has been decided elsewhere" (1015). You have little say in how things work because you're really just a cog—interchangeable and replicable and expected to be there only a short time. My supervisor told us that they expected people to last only eighteen months before they started looking for a transfer within the bank to another division. When even management con-

cedes that the job is undesirable, you can guess what the employees are thinking.

RESISTING CREATIVELY

I needed an outlet to vent my frustration with the job, so I turned to poetry. I also started getting other people to do poetry, deciding that I should make it a collective effort. Some stated that they didn't know how to do poetry, so I taught them the haiku form: 5-7-5. Chris came up with a brilliantly simple haiku that summed up our feelings:

> Back to the salt mines!
> Back to the salt mines, I say!
> Back to the salt mines!

People on my team began writing poetry and haiku and dropping them off at my cubicle. Some drew random pictures as well. I decided to call this underground literary journal *Screams from the Agents of Mosaix*.

Management really didn't know much about it, since there was a strict hierarchy (it was a bank, after all), but one time the bucket 3 supervisor (accounts that are 90–120 days past due) caught an unintentional glimpse of our work when I printed out one of my poems to the shared printer. I would send things to the printer and then quickly log off to retrieve it at the end of my call. The printer was a few cubes behind me, so it was quite easy to get the printout and be back before anyone noticed. This time, however, she beat me to the printer and was looking at my poem wide-eyed. It was a long form poem describing a multi-state murder spree in which our marauding band travels around killing the cardholders that pissed us off the most. It featured lines like:

> And in that dark day, when Goldhammer reigns supreme
> We will trample the corpses of those we slew

I'm pretty sure that this wasn't the report that she was looking for. I took the paper from her hands and said "That's mine. It's a long story." "I'll bet," was her reply.

That project not only helped us to vent about frustrating cardholders, it also brought us together more as a group. Even some of the collectors that were previously a bit quiet found a voice through poetry. Perhaps it also helped that others were doing it, too, so it may have felt safer for them to vent in this way. Plus, by that time it was clear that I was not a narc. I was not a favorite, but I did my job adequately well, so perhaps I was a good catalyst for this since I was obviously not an agent of management. We bitched enough during breaks to know that we were not alone, but this provided an outlet for our most angry, destructive feelings. It also showed that beneath

the calm veneer of even the most pleasant collections agent, there could be seething rage. This is unsurprising when you consider that everyone you call tends to hate you.

When I left my collections job for a position as an editor in the Internet sector, I realized just how much I had internalized the constraints of my position. On my first day of work at the new job, I told my manager that I was going on break. Then, around noon, I told her that I was going to lunch. She told me to sit down and asked where I had come from. I told her and she said, "They must have kept you on a pretty tight leash there. I don't care when you go on break. I don't care when you go to lunch. You can go for a half hour or an hour. So long as you get your work done, I really don't care." Later that week, I went to feed ducks at the fountain between our buildings for about twenty minutes. I called up Rich, one of my friends who still worked at the bank, although in another capacity, and said, "You know what I did today? I fed ducks. Because I could!" And I called him from my office phone.

The physical experience of working as a collections agent takes an emotional toll. But there is more to it than simply the collections portion. There is the utter helplessness of being tethered to your computer. Every minute of your day is regimented. The only way you can reclaim some sense of self is to disconnect emotionally. Sometimes this involves taking it out on the cardholders, other times it is logging off to go to the bathroom. In our case, we took an artistic approach to voicing our complaints among ourselves. But what we were all fighting was the feeling of being chained to the dialer. As Malcolm X put it,

> Any person who claims to have deep feeling for other human beings should think a long, long time before he votes to have other men kept behind bars— caged. I am not saying there shouldn't be prisons, but there shouldn't be bars. Behind bars, a man never reforms. He will never forget. He never will get completely over the memory of the bars. (X and Haley 1999, 155)

But the bars need not be physical. Floridi (2007) argues that we are becoming "inforgs"—connected informational organisms (62). He explains, however, that

> I am not referring here to the sci-fi vision of a "cyborged" humanity. Walking around with something like a Bluetooth wireless headset implanted in your ear does not seem the best way forward, not least because it contradicts the social message it is also meant to be sending: Being on call 24 X 7 is a form of slavery, and anyone so busy and important should have a PA (personal assistant) instead. (Floridi 2007, 62)

I would not go so far as to describe call center work as slavery, but there is certainly something slave-like in being physically tethered to one's chair. Such a feeling of helplessness almost requires that one resist in order to maintain his or her sense of humanity.

Creative endeavors can serve as means of resistance and have been a part of many social movements (Cixous 2001; Conrad 1988; CrimethInc. Workers' Collective 2005). Artistic outlets like angry poetry resist co-optation, which makes them quite powerful (although this does not mean that such outlets are immune from co-optation [see King 1999; 2006]). More importantly, poetry is a way to resist the dehumanization of technological work. Call center work, in particular, seems to be an exemplar of Ellul's (1964) description of *technique*, which, he explains, "does not mean machines, technology, or this or that procedure for attaining an end. In our technological society, *technique* is the *totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency* (for a given stage of development) in *every* field of human activity" (xxv). Although Ellul does not equate technique with machines, he notes that "technique transforms everything it touches into a machine" (4). But poetry is one thing that machines cannot do.

One can readily see Ellul's idea of technique in the case of the assembly line, Frederick Taylor's system of scientific management, and time/motion studies that force humans into the logic of the machine. In *The Principles of Scientific Management,* Taylor (1911) makes this explicit when he argues that "In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first" (7). It is difficult to conceive of a stronger argument for technique. Others have taken a similar stance, finding some kind of liberation in the form of the cyborg. Cyborg performance artist Stelarc notes that "up until now we have designed our machines ergonomically to better match our bodies and our metabolism, but because machines now generally outperform us in precision, speed, and power perhaps it is time to change the body to better perform with its machines" (quoted in Abrahamsson and Abrahamsson 2007, 295). Others, however, have been less celebratory concerning the potential for technology to free us from drudgery. Millar (1998) explains that

> while affluent Western feminists may see themselves as "cyborgs" as they use digital technologies for creative and professional purposes, less advantaged women—such as those who assemble computer equipment or enter data— experience "cyborg" life in a profoundly different and exploitative way. (62)

Thus, one could say that there are two kinds of cyborgs, but in each case there is a trend toward reverse ergonomics, where the human is expected to adapt to the machine.

At its heart, Taylorism is really about control. Lyon (1994) states that

scientific management essentially involves three processes: controlling and evaluating what workers actually do from day to day and from moment to moment so that costs can be counted accurately, integrating this with detailed control of production, and planning and monitoring production by means of new central management staff, who also gather and distribute information in new ways. (124)

All of this requires a significant amount of data, which is gathered by observing the workers in great detail. This, in turn, becomes a way to control workers by dictating best practices, scripts, and techniques. When workers deviate from these prescriptions, they must conform or be punished. Management becomes the inspector in the panoptic booth, seeking out these transgressions. In the case of the call center environment, it seems that this has become the primary role of managers; Lyon (1994) observes that "holding on to the means of surveillance is the only remaining basis of power that managers have over their workers" (133). Of course to say that we have moved into a post-Taylor society that still retains vestiges of Taylorism may be too simplistic. Postman (1993) argues that "a new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything" (18). This makes sense in that one cannot simply think of collections, for example, as previous collections practices plus computers. The notion of computerized collections significantly increases efficiency and control over the workers, but decreases interpersonal interaction with customers. It is a different thing, even as the aim of collecting money remains the same. McLuhan and McLuhan (1988) suggest that as a new technology enters the scene, there is a four way shift in the media environment as the technology enhances, reverses into, retrieves, and obsolesces certain related technologies and practices (129). Thus, post-Taylorism would likely retrieve elements of Taylorism, as well as enhancing other elements.

Postman (1993) observes that Taylor's work has served as a catalyst which helped move us into the realm of technopoly. He argues that "in the work of Frederick Taylor we have, I believe, the first clear statement of the idea that society is best served when human beings are placed at the disposal of their techniques and technology, that human beings are, in a sense, worth less than their machinery" (52). Wang (2009) likewise observes, "In Ellul's definition, *technique* denotes a state of affairs when methods are no longer means to ends but become ends themselves" (461). We might even suggest that Taylorism obsolesces the individual connection to the customer, but the post-Taylor world of the call center retrieves that connection. However, it does so in a way that is inauthentic. One must not actually connect with the customer. The connection is managed, scripted, and constrained by the logic of the dialer. The dialer selects the customer, places the call, and documents how long the agent took to speak to the customer and update the account

after the call. Everything is then reported to management who uses this information to evaluate the worker.

The logic of the dialer can be seen most clearly in one standard call center metric: call time, or how long the agent spends on the call and documentation after the call (McLean-Conner, 2012). The electronic dialer is designed to reduce the time spent actually dialing the customer's number and accessing the account. The only variable left is how fast the worker can get through the call and document the transaction. The faster the worker completes and documents the call, the more customers that worker can contact. But these contacts are not the same as making connections because it is difficult to make actual connections with customers when the agent must do so in a matter of minutes in an arbitrary sequence. One does not have a "clientele" that he or she visits. Instead, the customer information comes up seemingly at random, like an electronic dialer roulette wheel. Any connection with the customer is mostly illusory.

There is, then, a sense of efficiency but only of a particular kind. First, the efficiency has little to do with our feedback in the system. Nothing we do will actually change the system in any demonstrable way. If we slow down, for example, the system does not adjust its speed accordingly. In short, we are no longer part of a cybernetic system that seeks an optimum level of efficiency between human and machine (for more on the importance of feedback in cybernetic systems, see Wiener 1961). The desired efficiency has been set by others not connected to the system and any slowing is seen as a failure of the workers, rather than those who designed the system. Second, there is efficiency in what is measured, but we must take care that what is measured is desirable. In his discussion of Taylorism, Peaucelle (2000) explains that "Taylor explicitly inscribed an indicator of efficiency, human productivity, a technical indicator, measurable as the ratio of the quantity produced to the time spent by the workers in producing it" (454). But what exactly is being produced in call center work? The efficiency created is not the number of customers whose accounts we helped to bring current, but rather the accounts that we brought current. This may seem like semantic hair-splitting, but the focus of the system is on calls per hour and dollars collected per day. Both of these metrics are abstractions that shift our focus away from the individual on the other end of the line.

Martin Buber suggests that one should connect with others by considering their individuality—an I-Thou relationship. However, the system pushes the worker into an I-It relationship with the cardholder. As Buber (1958) points out, "the mankind of mere *It* that is imagined, postulated and propagated by such a man has nothing in common with a living mankind where *Thou* may be spoken" (28). Connection is sacrificed in the name of efficiency. This is, to an extent, the design of business; business is generally the realm of the impersonal. Indeed, Sennett (1996) saw the demise of the public sphere in

the pursuit of intimacy and argued that "The extent to which people can learn to pursue aggressively their interests in society is the extent to which they learn to act impersonally" (349). There is some truth to this, depending on one's philosophical stance. For example, Bentham (1823) wrote, "It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong" (vi). From such a standpoint, one cannot let individual connections and relationships stand in the way of public good. Still, Buber (1958) would counter that "the separated *It* of institutions is an animated clod without soul" (53). Moreover, even business relies on networking and building relationships.

The only way to break out of this cycle of impersonality is to defy the metrics and take the time to listen to the individual as another human being. Lanier (2010) laments, "I fear that we are beginning to design ourselves to suit digital models of us, and I worry about a leaching of empathy and humanity in that process" (39). The control mechanisms of the call center environment discourage humanity and empathy, but it does happen. As I mentioned before, I had cardholders ask to speak to my supervisor to tell them that I was the first one who had actually listened to their problems. I told a man with terminal cancer how to stop the collection calls and let the account charge off. I was not the first one to speak to this individual and the account was well documented. He had lost his job because of his illness and had about six months to live. To call him would be a waste of time for me (or any other collector) because he would not be able to make a payment. But, more importantly, I simply did not want to call him. I wanted this man to hear from loved ones at the end of his life rather than people trying to collect money. It seemed that many had heard what this man had to say, but few had actually listened to him. I realize that I often fell into the same pattern, because when I genuinely listened—during those moments when I allowed myself to do so—my call times would take a hit. I kept most of my calls within the acceptable range, so it was never much of a problem, but the metric of call time would not allow a collector to do so consistently. One must get through the call. Nothing personal. Each call is nothing more than making another widget. Therein lies the insidious part of the assembly line mentality of the call center with its emphasis on efficiency. The widget doesn't care if you treat it like a widget, but most people do (or, at least, they should).

I remember a time when I worked at UPS as the claims verification person for our center. The person who input claims had worked in the hub (where the packages are loaded and unloaded) and was asked by the industrial engineering group how to reduce claims. Her answer was simple: let the loaders and unloaders work just a bit slower. Their response? "Well, it looks like we'll just have to deal with the claims." Efficiency is the watchword of modern industry, with such initiatives as ISO 9000 and the time/motion

studies pioneered by Taylor. But the most efficient way may not always be the best way. Peaucelle (2000) describes how "a French autoworker involved in quality improvement operations once commented with humor: 'At Renault, the word quality is spelled q-u-a-n-t-i-t-y'" (459). I am reminded of a saying: you can have things done fast, done well, or done cheaply—chose two. Modern industry, however, seems to believe that it can have all three at once.

Mick and Fournier (1998) found that "technological products are often positioned as facilitating control and freedom. Yet these same technologies can also breed the opposite conditions of upheaval and dependency" (p. 128). Each technological decision leads one down a path that is not easily escaped, and Mick and Fournier's (1998) paradox of "freedom/enslavement" (126) sounds a lot like the master/slave dialectic described by Hegel (1994). All of this leaves me with the uncomfortable question of where we should go next, as I recognize that any choice will limit future possibilities. In his discussion of automation of jobs formerly occupied by humans (such as ATMs and voice mail), Winner (1997) concludes, "None of us can escape the influence of these systems, regardless of what we may think of them; for as we interact with these devices, our behaviors are automated as well" (995). As the system changes, we likewise change. Working at a call center was soul-sucking, but how else can one do customer service at this point? The genie is out of the bottle. Do customers really want to go to the store to see the person who may be able to solve the problem, or do they want to sit at home in their pajamas and do it on the phone? As someone who does most of his Christmas shopping online, perhaps I am part of the efficiency problem. To use Ellul's (1992) words, "Behind all techniques are, of necessity, living individuals" (40). The system is not held in place by a faceless "them," but rather by "us." Am I ready to reduce my need for efficiency? I'm just not sure.

I am certain of one thing, however. I really don't want to have to put on the electronic leash again. If I had to I would for the sake of my family. One of my former professors once told me about a time when she took a job at a call center. When they asked why a woman with a PhD would want to work in customer service, she told them, "I have a husband dying of cancer and I need a job. If you hire me I'll work hard." Call centers are the kind of work that one does because they must, not because they enjoy it. There are points of light in the situation to be sure. I enjoyed my colleagues and we found some pleasure in the dark humor of mocking cardholders. Still, I would have much preferred to meet them under better circumstances. As Shakespeare (1999) wrote, "misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows" (31). I can't help but think that the people we were in the call center were not the best that we could be, that we were mere shadows of ourselves. The I-It stance that we took toward the cardholders likely spilled over into our interactions with each other, as it became second nature so long as we were in the call center.

We could not be our best selves because the bank was paying us to perform a specific function and to do so in a relatively uniform manner. We were essentially interchangeable—cogs in the machine.

The problem with being treated like a thing is that it becomes much easier to treat others like things, especially when the system in which you operate encourages such thinking or, more accurately, "thinging." If you are being evaluated based on call time with a premium placed on short call times, you will do what you can to speed through the call and get on to the next one, even if that means no engagement with the cardholder. Despite the bank's requirement that we find out why the cardholder had not paid the minimum payment, the actual reason was far less important than the amount that they promised to pay and the means by which that payment would take place. It was much easier to simply write "overextended" or "unemployed" than to actually explain what had happened. To do so would require far too much call time and require too much time to update the account. If we didn't have an acronym figured out (e.g., OE = overextended), it had better be an interesting story that will help the next collector work the account. We bought into the logic of the system because we had little choice if we wanted to keep our jobs.

But this logic can be dangerous. It is not much of a stretch to go from "cardholder" to "account." Semantics matter. Burke (1966) explains how particular words can filter our perception, calling this phenomenon "terministic screens." He explains, "Pick some particular nomenclature, some one terministic screen. . . . That you may proceed to track down the kinds of observations implicit in the terminology you have chosen, whether your choice of terms was deliberate or spontaneous" (Burke 1966, 47). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) make a similar case, explaining that the language we use highlights some aspects and obscures others (10). When we spoke of accounts rather than cardholders, we stopped thinking of people and began thinking of abstractions. Empathy is the first casualty when one begins to dehumanize people during the course of a job. I saw it in my own work. I really didn't care about the sorrows that had befallen these people. Some had lost jobs, others were going through messy divorces, still others had major medical problems. Of course there were also those who were simply unwise. But in the vast majority of cases I stopped caring about them as individuals.

I would like to say that this is because I didn't have time to care, but I suspect that it went deeper than that. I think that the particular forms of mediation involved in the interaction allowed me to more easily disregard their humanity. In his discussion of television's ability to inform the public of events such as the attacks on the World Trade Center, Morgan (2001) explains that because television only presents "sound and image, but not the other senses, it does us an enormous disservice. It is the senses of touch and smell that make events real to us. Without those, the true horror cannot strike

home" (11). When the immediacy is gone, it is easier to simply think of the cardholders as disembodied voices on the other end of the line, rather than as living, breathing, feeling human beings. Add to that the feeling that I had to become machinelike to do my job and it was much easier to turn off my emotions than to actually think of them as people.

We all seemed to buy into the logic of the system to some extent; we had to in order to do our jobs effectively. If we were to take the time to interact with each cardholder as a human being with emotions and worth, we would almost of necessity violate the imperative to keep our call times as short as possible. Our ethics were dictated more by the guidelines of the Fair Debt Collections Practices Act than from Kant's (1994) demand that we "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means" (36). But despite this seeming victory of technological control, our humanity emerged in ways that are evident to me only now. Our complaining about and even abusing the cardholders, our poetry, our logging off to use the bathroom—all of these acts were attempts to reclaim a sense of humanity. We had to do something in practice to demonstrate that we had not completely integrated with the system. These acts of resistance illustrated how our sense of being controlled at a distance had both very real and very definite limits. We may have given our bodies and our time to Mosaix, but it could not completely have our souls.

NOTE

1. Psalm 139: 7–12 reads, "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee."

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