

## A SPECULATIVE CONCLUSION

### *Secrets and Lives*

*Had I heard about Meenakshi? It was Rajeshwari calling me from their apartment about six weeks after I had left Berlin. Meena was gone. She had returned to Hyderabad without telling anyone. Meenakshi had lost her job after the end of her last contract. Failing to find another position afterward, she was compelled to leave the country when her visa ran out. While all this was going on, she pretended to go to work every day as if nothing were wrong. Thinking back over the previous year, it seemed that throughout this period of joblessness, Meenakshi appeared to be happy about her office and her work, telling me often about how much fun it was to interact with her international colleagues. After Meena was forced out of Berlin, she returned to India, and she cut off all contact with everyone she had known in Germany. Wanting to hear more of her story, I asked Rajeshwari a few weeks later if she had heard anything or if she knew how I might get in contact with her again. Rajeshwari told me she had had no contact with her, and she doubted anyone else would either. "After what she did," intoned Rajeshwari, "I don't think anyone would want to talk to her."*

Meenakshi's story highlights the risks undertaken by Indian programmers as they cycle through visa-backed programming jobs in Europe. To improve their economic and social position in India, they take short-term positions abroad, knowing and hoping these will catapult them into permanent careers. Conditions of labor in the IT industry, which are based

on a vision of seemingly limitless and flexible achievement, often mask the costs of taking these jobs—even for industry insiders. For many short-term programmers, promise of future success creates blind spots vis-à-vis current conditions of work. Tracing stories such as Meenakshi's reveals the provisional status of their labor and its implicit trade-off of temporary instability for future permanence. This slender promise is one way that Indian programmers are bound to short-term, precarious jobs.

Meenakshi's story is, in another sense, an ethnographic lapse. Despite the countless meals and evenings of gossip I had shared with her, Meenakshi disappeared fully when she went. My failure to find her and ask her about her departure might reveal a flaw in method. As an ethnographer, after all, I was meant to develop a close rapport with informants and share intimate, even secret, knowledge with them. Yet, over the course of writing this book, I began to think of her silence itself as telling. Like the partial access to offices that informs part I, Meenakshi's disappearance—and the reactions to it from friends and colleagues—tells its own story of risk and possibility in cognitive work.

In initial attempts to write this ethnography, Meenakshi's story led me to focus on the kinds of ideological double binds that keep short-term programmers in jobs that are unfulfilling to them. In this framing, Meenakshi is another victim of a "capitalist metabolism that harvests vitality and deposits it into privileged life worlds."<sup>1</sup> Although this aspect remains important to my understanding of race, class, and code in short-term corporate programming, I now also want to take Meenakshi's departure as a potential opening. Respecting her silence, I do not want to make it speak definitively for one story or another, but I want to treat the silence itself as meaningful as a possible "outside" to the politics of work and affect as normally understood.

This concluding chapter unfolds in three parts. I initially discuss the circumstances that may have led Meenakshi to her double life. Then, I turn to two ways to understand the aftermath of her deception: I explore how her story exemplifies what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism."<sup>2</sup> And I read her departure in another way, using Kathi Weeks's exposition of "critical utopia."<sup>3</sup> I explore these two possibilities (and recognize there may be several more) so as not to read the secret life as the true, real life behind the façade. Instead, I emphasize the multiple and shifting forms of life that are invoked in this story.

To understand why Meenakshi carried on “working” and did not turn to her circle of friends, it helps to explore the competing versions of what the computer and the Indian programmer should be that have wended their way through this book. When Rajeshwari assures me that no one would want to talk to Meenakshi after what she did, she is telling me that Meena had gone beyond the actions that could be deemed appropriate in pursuing status abroad. Shutting out Meenakshi in this way suggests one version of the Indian programmer that she failed to live up to: a reliable link in a professional diaspora. Hiding her termination and pretending to go to work every day perhaps indicated that she was a figure who could not be trusted. In the Indian programming diaspora, new and better jobs often depended on getting information and sometimes a place to stay from friends and relations outside India. As described in chapter 6, the networks of diasporic Indian households that help provide support and connections for migrant programmers in the United States, Europe, Australia, and elsewhere are forged through chains of gifting that do the affective work of binding work and family life together—gifts help make convincing arguments for why loved ones should take jobs overseas and stand in for the care an absent son or daughter, father or mother would otherwise provide. Meenakshi lost value in these networks in two ways. Unable to marshal her own connections to get a new job, she could not be expected to help others. And her actions branded her as an inherently untrustworthy partner in a venture—like going overseas for work—that was already quite risky.

Another way of accounting for Meenakshi’s disappearance would be to read it through a cultural understanding of shame. According to cultural psychologists, shame is a primary moral and social motivator in India, China, Japan, and other Asian countries, whereas guilt serves a similar function in the West. These scholars understand shame to be an emotion that aligns individual action with collective moral sanctions. According to such a theory, Meenakshi hid her firing because of the shame of having one’s actions judged negatively by a group of friends and family.<sup>4</sup> While there may be some sense of shame (though it is unclear what kind of shame is at work) driving her actions, I do not take the analysis in this direction.<sup>5</sup> While the analysis of shame can usefully lead a discussion of emotions “away from an ethics of autonomy” and toward “an ethics of community,” it remains a calcified analytic as long as it is reducible to the logic of

how things work “over there” and “over here.”<sup>6</sup> If nothing else, diasporic, middle-class, and transnational Indian coders can certainly not simply fall into the category of an emotional “over there” marked by the East. Rather than argue that they represent an in-between or liminal form of morality somewhere between autonomy and collectivity, I think a better approach begins with the action produced by Meenakshi’s departure and then traces how this act calls on and inaugurates new structures of interpretation.<sup>7</sup> In that sense, Rajeshwari’s commentary cites her disappearance as an example of negative action and thus works to fortify a narrative of success that remains untroubled by Meenakshi’s tale.

Meenakshi’s story held up an unwelcome mirror to the instability in programmers’ lives. Indeed, many programmers refused to entertain the possibility that what befell Meenakshi could also befall them. Srinu and Mayur told me they were very surprised when they found out that Meenakshi had been pretending to go to work. They too had made no attempt to contact her. Bipin and Madhu said they had no contact with her and did not expect to hear from her again. Mihir simply shrugged and said, “Who knows if she would dare show her face to us again?” When I asked Adi why he thought Meenakshi did what she did, he told me he did not know but that it was really a scandal when everyone found out. He found it unbelievable that she could tell everyone so many lies, and like Rajeshwari, he roundly condemned her for it and echoed the sentiment that he doubted whether anyone would see her again. Asked what he would do if he suddenly lost his job and whether he might be tempted to hide it, he promptly responded, “That would never happen to me because I am always exploring other options. And I make sure I have an untroubled mind so that I won’t get caught up in these things and take the wrong road.” Adi referred simultaneously to his continuous searching for better opportunities, increasing his skill set, and to his daily meditating, which he deemed crucial to withstanding the stresses of the work he did. His answer suggests yet another view of what the Indian programmer should be—entrepreneurial, calm, and guaranteed successful.

In Adi’s response lies one possible reason Meenakshi led a double life. Meenakshi was excommunicated from her group of programmers because they felt she had crossed a moral boundary in lying to them about her job and pretending to go to work every day as usual. Yet her actions conform rather well to a general pattern of risk taking in the short term in the hope

of long-term reward. Indeed, many Indian programmers described going abroad or working extra hours at the office in those terms. By taking short-term work, they hoped that a permanent contract would be forthcoming; by working longer hours, they might see a new project in the offing.<sup>8</sup> Within what we might call an ecology of success, Meenakshi chose to remain outwardly successful until she might convert her job loss into a better position. Given enough time, she might have done so.

Meenakshi's double life illuminates the strategies of deferral that Indian IT workers continually practice. Mihir, for instance, took me aside one spring afternoon when we were taking a group trip to the Reichstag. He showed me a visa in his passport for the United States. It had his picture in grainy black and white and a duration of eighteen months on it. To my surprised look, he responded, "Don't tell the others, I don't want them to feel bad that I might be leaving." When I asked him if he planned to move to America, he told me, "Only as a last resort." This visa, procured for him by a friend who was currently in the United States on a similar visa, would allow him to enter the country in the service of a contractor—or body shopper—who would keep him on hand to work on a job-specific basis for a larger U.S. firm. For Mihir, such a move would only begin to look attractive if he had no other options in Germany, because working for a body shop might mean sitting unemployed for months on end (being benched), all the while racking up debt to the contractor who provided the visa.<sup>9</sup> Mihir's strategy of chasing multiple possibilities in a situation of precarious labor coupled with hiding these strategies for the sake of maintaining group solidarity was not very different from Meenakshi's. Conceiving of this strategy as one that will always maximize their potential for success obscures the ever-present risk of failure.<sup>10</sup>

Another ideal of the Indian programmer Meenakshi failed to live up to might be encapsulated in a "respectable femininity" where "the practices within IT firms reflect a particular Indian middle-class culture," which allows for women's agency to the extent that it is "in support of an Indian family life." Respectable femininity complements "a professional, highly competent persona."<sup>11</sup> Both Meenakshi and Rajeshwari were particularly concerned with producing respectable femininity while being young, unmarried, and abroad. They often discussed their ultimate goal as being *of* the family, but not constrained *by* the family. They told me that their role among their circle of friends was to be the ones who made sure all the holidays were celebrated and people met up with and supported

one another by hosting pujas in their home, cooking, and holding special prayer sessions. Importantly, they added that they could not be seen to do these kinds of activities too much, since, in Rajeshwari's terms, they would "end up like their grandmothers." Their ability to succeed as career women depended on their walking a careful line between supporting the family and not being reduced to being only a homemaker with limited rights and freedoms. As Smitha Radhakrishnan similarly notes, "Through a discourse of balance, restraint, and 'knowing the limit,' IT women embody the 'right amount' of freedom, distinguishing themselves both from the promiscuous West, as well as from other Indian women of previous generations and of different class positions."<sup>12</sup>

Meenakshi's actions responded to the problem of gender norms even as they were judged by the same rubric. She believed that to be independent yet family oriented, she would have to make a name and career for herself outside India and only then return home. When I sat down with her one day for a formal interview, she explained her reasons for coming to Berlin as the next logical stage in her career and also as a delay tactic. Because her parents wanted someone to take over their aquaculture businesses and her older sister was unwell, they wanted her to marry right away. She was not ready for that and did not think it would be fair to lay the responsibility for the business at the feet of a new husband. To delay her marriage and perhaps change the terms under which she married, she decided to go abroad and have her own career first, before settling down. As Meenakshi constructed it, her freedom to remain unmarried for a time depended on being successful abroad. She was able to delay what she saw as the normal course for her as a young woman through her IT labor. Continuing to pretend to go to work after being terminated while looking for another job may have been her way of keeping that structure of delay alive.

In doing so, Meenakshi's subterfuge crossed the limit of respectable femininity. She and other programmers construed their cohort of young Indian programmers as a para-family, a substitute family in diaspora. This argument was often put forth as important to surviving life abroad. Mihir suggested to me that because they were like a family and maintaining that feeling was important, slights and oversights that normally would cause offense were routinely overlooked. He gave me the example of a younger person in the group asking an older person to run to the store and get sugar right before a party. When this happened, no one complained, although, accord-

ing to Mihir, it should be the younger one who runs the errand. For the sake of maintaining group solidarity, such slights were in the main brushed aside.

Against this backdrop of maintaining para-family cohesion, Meenakshi's double life may have been read as putting her own career first while jeopardizing the family. This feeling may have been exacerbated by the sense that she was putting the reputation of Indian programmers at risk by lying. Though there was often vociferous disagreement about all aspects of life, on the question of Meenakshi's actions, agreement that she had acted beyond the limit of the respectable was reached quickly, as if to foreclose her breach lending itself to a more significant reevaluation of the meaning of success in this cognitive economy.

Each framing of the ideal Indian IT worker posed above offers a way of understanding why Meenakshi hid her dismissal. One ideal is that of the networked, diasporic Indian professional. Another is that of the Indian programmer as an entrepreneurial subject, eliding failure by being always in search of new and better opportunities. Yet a third is of the Indian woman software developer as liberated but family oriented. Meenakshi failed to live up to each of these in the moment that her strategy of betting on finding a new job before she faced extradition began to crumble. It was likely in the name of these very same ideals or ones very much like them that Meenakshi hid her dismissal in the first place. In doing so, she walled herself off from the very diasporic networks that could have helped her move elsewhere in the global software economy. Perhaps she feared that, as a young woman, these networks would turn against her and urge her to go home and marry instead of going onward.

### **Two Lives: After Precarity**

The previous section was a necessarily speculative account of why Meenakshi may have chosen to hide her dismissal. This section reads her vanishing as meaningful as well. But, rather than taking her disappearance as proof of the wretchedness of her double life, I treat it as an invitation to think through the meaning of work and its alternatives. One possible way to understand Meenakshi's disappearance is as a symptom of—and answer to—the pressures of being flexible and entrepreneurial. According to theorists of the effect of immaterial labor on working populations, neoliberal demands for flexible workers and footloose capital have produced what they term a *new precarity* for working subjects:

In industrial production, abstract labor time was impersonated by a physical and juridical bearer, embodied in a worker in flesh and bone, with a certified and political identity. . . . [I]f capital wanted to dispose of the necessary time for its valorization, it was indispensable to hire a human being, to buy all of its time, and therefore needed to face up to the material needs and trade union and political demands of which the human was a bearer. When we move into the sphere of info-labor there is no longer a need to have bought a person for eight hours a day indefinitely. Capital no longer recruits people, but buys packets of time, separated from their interchangeable and occasional bearers.<sup>13</sup>

For those who work as cognitive laborers, the separation between personal identity and work time means that while their time is bought by the company, the status of their person is both formally “free” and outside the domain of corporate responsibility. In other words, while white-collar corporate IT workers are free to pursue their own interests and bring their own personalities to work, and indeed, the diversity of cultures is considered a value added from the perspective of management, because what is bought by the company are packets of time rather than the whole person, the company is divested of responsibility for the embodied, emotional, and psychic life of the worker as human being. For Berardi, the ultimate, indeed inevitable outcome of the bifurcation of person and a person’s time is a kind of psychic collapse of the system as a whole. The global financial collapse of 2008, on the one hand, and the mass use of antidepressants, on the other, concretized this collapse.

Much of the argument about this new precarity seems to take Fordism as a baseline from which to think through change and, in so doing, perhaps unwittingly produces a certain nostalgia for the worker protections that Fordism may have provided.<sup>14</sup> The description of precarity is often a structure of feeling that emanates from the European and American middle classes. Too often, the Euro-American bourgeois affective stance becomes a *de facto* normative position. In spite of the intention to project marginalization to the center, the experience of the center continues to define the presumed common ground. The rote naming of other precarious subjects (the migrant, the homeless) without exploration of the varieties of precarity and differences in the demand on neoliberal subjectivity made of them ignores what Angela Mitropoulos calls “the reallocation of risk or its valo-



risation, [and] the displacement and redistribution of uncertainty” that is managed through new types of contractual arrangements.<sup>15</sup>

For many precarious subjects, the dream of a good life that is the original condition for precarity was not available in the same way as it was to working- and upper-class white men. What would it mean to take these other histories into account in theorizing the emergence of precarity as a structure of feeling and as a structure of work? And how would we frame the relationship between neoliberalism and the expectation of subjects across these differences?

The quick summing up of Meenakshi as a boundary-crossing outsider by her peers paints a different picture. In this picture, workers stay attached to the promise of self-fulfilling work and personal expression even when faced with the evidence of the impossibility of this vision of the good life. Lauren Berlant has called this attachment a “cruel optimism,” occurring when “a person or world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.”<sup>16</sup> In addition to being attached to a dream of the good life even in the face of a continual failure to achieve it, such optimism is cruel for the fact that being attached is itself a structure that has become comfortable and therefore in some way an affirmation of life. The failure to take Meenakshi’s story as a cautionary tale is an example of this attachment. Her story is generalized as a case of immoral and unethical behavior, allowing for a return to the pleasures of impermanency and to upholding the future as a secure one.

In Berlant’s discussion of the attachment to precarity, she dissects *Time Out*, a film by Laurent Cantet, in which a middle manager named Vincent loses his job and pretends to go to work each day, meanwhile supporting himself and his family through gray market transactions. When in the movie he is finally found out by his family, he is returned to the world of white-collar, temporary labor. His father finds him another job, without security or benefits, where the primary work, according to Berlant, is to produce neutral or mildly positive facial expressions as an outward and communicative sign of satisfaction. Berlant writes, “His incapacity to lose everything, to go genuinely off the grid towards the horizon of his negativity, is not surprising, for there is nothing else for him in the impasse, no anarchist energy, no dramatic refusal, no gun and no gasoline for the road. In place of being happy, he gets one more chance at making faces in the social.”<sup>17</sup> *Time Out* is a document that attests to the mortgaging of future happiness for the simulated happiness of the present.

Berlant reads the structure of the film as a guide to the way that affect is tethered to the false promise of a future of stability. Similarly, the conclusion becomes a signpost for the emptiness of the impasse; the way out that Vincent cannot take is the path toward “off the grid” dramatic refusal. That is what it would take, writes Berlant, to reach for happiness. Without “an imaginary for the terms and the register in which new claims on social resources of reciprocity could be made,”<sup>18</sup> Meenakshi, it seems, like the protagonist, Vincent, can stand only as a monument to the viciousness of hoping for a risky future.

And yet, Meenakshi has gone off the grid, but she did not pursue an “anarchist energy” to get herself there. Is there no other way to read the impasse except as either a continuity of simulated happiness or as a moment before leaping into the freedom of a new social compact? Can one go off the grid without either being constrained to the exceptional case of personal failure or liberated after the fact as an alternative, anarchist hero?

In Kathi Weeks’s salvaging of the idea of utopia, she argues that a critical utopian project would refigure utopia “as a process and a project rather than an end or goal, and open utopia . . . to multiple insights and directions.”<sup>19</sup> Arguing for a politics of hope that is grounded in the past and reaches toward possible futures that are as yet unimaginable, Weeks finds in science fiction and the manifesto traces of this fragmentary training of political desire—what she calls the “less is more” advantages of an open and partial critical utopia.<sup>20</sup> Another way to understand Meenakshi’s vanishing quite apart from the binary of rebellion and acceptance of cruel optimism is to think of her disappearance as a demand. That the content of this demand remains inarticulate makes it a partial and fragmentary gesture at best, but one that nevertheless moves the discourse of what can be desired in a new direction.

Rather than running along the lines of the networked, successful diasporic Indian middle-class life that has been so clearly articulated by her peers, perhaps her silence is also a statement of another desire—the desire to be left alone. I do not wish to overstate the positive content of this desire. She has also, inevitably, been silenced by those same sets of desirable persons who shun her as outside their fold. And, as she remains in silence, it is a legitimate question as to whether this act can be construed as an act of social resistance much less rebellion.

A close colleague of mine who heard Meenakshi’s story urged me to hold to the possibility that Meenakshi’s disappearance means that she has killed

herself. Her story, according to this reading, would be proof of the ultimate inhumanity of short-term labor that promises so much and delivers only to the few. This line of thinking recalls another moment of silencing and suicide discussed by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri, the protagonist of that narrative, spoke eloquently of her political convictions through the language of choosing death but nevertheless failed to be “heard” as a political subject and was instead sequestered behind the walls of female delirium and within the language of illicit love. While not denying the psychic and social suffering of failure, I hold the possibility of suicide as one among many possible outcomes for Meenakshi. I argue that these possibilities should not be collapsed into one overdetermining, scandalous reality.<sup>21</sup> Meenakshi’s silence might be set in opposition to Bhubaneshwari’s lack of amplification.<sup>22</sup> Though her story may very well be carried on as only a story of a woman’s failure to succeed, her lack of findability in an era where everyone is purposefully accessible gestures toward an alternative that rejects—without necessarily directly opposing—the strictures and binds of the entrepreneurial classes.

A return to the double meaning of the root of precarity—the *precarium*—can allow for these multiple readings of Meenakshi’s story to hold equal weight in analysis. The *precarium*, as defined in Roman law, was “the use and enjoyment of an object given to another, but it could be revoked at any time.”<sup>23</sup> The institution of the *precarium* was a primary facet of medieval European land rights, where small grants were often ceded to the church and then returned to the landholder as a *precarium* in exchange for a monthly rent.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, the power to revoke the right of the *precarium* tracks with neoliberal conditions of work in which employment in general is destabilized and steady work begins to feel like something granted to the worker that may be revoked at any time. On the other, the *precarium* was a right of use and enjoyment of something, which suggests precarity as not only or primarily an impoverishment but also as a ground on which to pursue a right to pleasure, however temporarily. These moments of pleasure, when read through Weeks’s analysis of critical utopias, are times when we can “flex our desiring muscles” and learn to make wider and more life-affirming demands of the work we do.<sup>25</sup>

In thinking about Meenakshi’s positioning vis-à-vis precarity, I want to emphasize a doubling of the meaning of precarity—a form of ownership for enjoyment that can be revoked without warning. Juxtaposing

the critical utopia espoused by Kathi Weeks and the cruel optimism put forth by Lauren Berlant inclines toward a reading of these as two simultaneously held positions, rather than as two exclusive alternatives. Meenakshi's disappearance contains both the story of the impossible revoking of a dream and the story of a kind of ownership over her own entrepreneurial self-management that extends a trajectory begun by the move toward eros catalyzed by the restrictions placed on the Indian IT worker as racialized high-skilled subject.

### Thinking Race and Class Together at the Scene of Precarity

In Karen-Sue Taussig's account of genetic science in the Netherlands, she argues that Dutch ideas of tolerance inform the way that genetic science is undertaken. In the Netherlands, difference has been managed through what Taussig identifies as pillarization—the assembling of people into identifiable social groups that are internally homogeneous—and through an ethic of “ordinariness” that defines Dutch culture as occupying a normal middle ground between extremes. Taussig suggests that this national framework for managing multiculturalism is reflected in genetic scientists' desire to manage genetic material into recognizable social groups.<sup>26</sup> In Part I, *Encoding Race*, I argue along similar lines that the presence of Indian IT workers in Germany replays German approaches to multiculturalism, which manage difference through an ethic of liberal tolerance—defined as the ability to find in others a recognizable difference that can then be accepted and positively valued. Using the comparative cases of Afrodeutsch and Turkish German populations, I show that Indian programmers offered an acceptable narrative of difference based on assumed religious identity (Hinduism rather than Islam) and temporary status (not permanent migrants who need to be assimilated).<sup>27</sup> Yet, I also contend that these assessments interlace with understandings of race produced in part through a folk genomics that maps genetic variability onto world cultures. This impacted on the way that the qualities of these Indian subjects were formulated, especially as they related to work. Indeed, one way that genomic research seems to be filtering into common-sense understandings of race is precisely through the lens of new work regimes, where the qualities of individual workers are at once naturalized and cultivated. What I call an “indecidability” in the meaning of race lends variety to the way Indian programmers are fit into an office environment, at once underscoring the correctness of sequestering

them in limited, short-time jobs and creating the expectation that their difference would lend an unexpected frisson to office culture.

As I argue in part II, *Encoding Class*, pursuing a good life through overseas IT work puts primacy on eros as the pursuit of life “in lasting and expanding relations.”<sup>28</sup> The elaboration of this vision of the good life is at once a response to the restrictions placed on back-office Indian programmers in European companies and a means by which a middle-class Indian imaginary is reconstructed, through a dialectic of training the body and the mind for knowledge work and the pursuit of non-work-directed pleasure.

In the deployment of eros to resist the colonization of life by work, these programmers concomitantly produce a middle-class imaginary that is made to stand in for national character. The famous consumerism of the new Indian middle class, then, needs to be understood not only in opposition to Nehruvian austerity but also in conjunction with the global politics of establishing a class identity that converts the politics of racialized labor into those of national identity. By focusing on the good life and not on labor, these diasporic programmers differentiate themselves as a middle class that is neither to be confused with the profligate Indian elite nor with the Indian poor, nor with the global black and brown workforce laboring on the lower rungs of European, U.S., and Australian economies. The consolidation of Indian middle-class identity through eros is at once a critique of work and a way of silencing the multiple extensions of eros and the solidarities they might allow.<sup>29</sup> The transposition between race and class happens there through the mediation of an Indian national imaginary, where, for instance, the purported laziness of the Indian programmer converts to a badge of honor through which the dedication to work rather than to punctuality can be asserted as a particularly *Indian* trait.

Having traced how middle-class eros can be a counterconduct to the emplotment of the Indian IT worker through a racial imaginary that figures “him” as a threat to European job stability, on the one hand, or as a promise of future productivity for Europe, on the other, I now turn to some of the unintended pathways that this counterconduct may open up. To illustrate these possibilities—and how they are foreclosed in most readings of the precarious—I return to Berardi’s *Precarious Rhapsody*. “It’s a strange word,” Berardi writes, in sarcasm tipped with hyperbole, “with which we identify the ideology prevalent in the post-human transition to

digital slavery: liberalism. Liberty is its foundational myth, but the liberty of whom? The liberty of capital, certainly. . . . But liberalism also predicates the liberty of the person. The juridical person is free to express itself, to choose its representatives, to be entrepreneurial at the level of politics and the economy. Very interesting. Only the person has disappeared. What is left is like an inert object, irrelevant and useless. The person is free, sure. But his time is enslaved.”<sup>30</sup>

Berardi’s critique of liberalism in this passage suggests that only the liberty of capital is ensured, while the liberty of the person is a false one, true only formally but not in fact. But what Berardi overlooks is the importance of this formal freedom as the site of the elaboration of practices against the enslavement of time. The “false,” *de jure*, freedom of the juridical person nevertheless makes possible critical utopian pathways that demand that this promise of freedom be kept. By dismissing free expression as a capitalist trick, Berardi fails to recognize the doubling of liberalism as both promise and limit.<sup>31</sup>

As Marx recognized, liberal freedom was surely false in that it allowed the capitalist to buy not the labor of the worker but the labor power, that is, the productivity of the worker as a whole from which surplus labor could be extracted as a gift.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, Marx also allowed that the juridical pretense of fair labor traded on the market yielded class struggle over, for instance, the length of the working day, since the worker as freely transacting citizen could legitimately protect a right to social and bodily reproduction.<sup>33</sup>

The protagonists of this story likewise both recognize and disavow an Indian citizenship that is necessarily imagined through their success in the global market. In doing so, they carve out multiple forms of authority for themselves—both individual and collective. Far from only being enslaved to cognitive economies, programmers work within the formal freedoms and affiliations they provide. In a different context, Matthew Hull discusses how civil servants in Islamabad’s Capital Development Authority both deny and assert individual agency, by creating paper records that transfer responsibility to the collective “bureaucracy,” on the one hand, and by asserting individual agency by going outside the bureaucracy’s normal documented chain of command, on the other.<sup>34</sup> Although Indian programmers do not belong to an identifiable institution like a state bureaucracy, their distancing practices—accomplished through jokes, fierce discussion of the

future of India, and criticism of government power writ large—might do a similar sort of mediating work between collective and individual agency. By affirming national identity through collective understandings of Indianness that nevertheless are not simply positive, they create a space for their own action that is not always already swallowed up by the trope of diasporic programmer as nation. Into these openings comes both a critique of the Indian government and an exploration of a good life not directly tethered to the demands of work and success. Thus, while it is certainly useful to suggest diasporic middle-class Indians, like these programmers, are trying to be Indian and Western at the same time, this description does not go far enough in specifying the relationship between this achievement and either the microprocesses of making agency or the larger structural entailments signaled by the global reorganization of work.

One of Hull's objectives in his book is "to understand collectivization and individualization as simultaneous functions of the same bureaucratic processes, taking neither the agency of the individual nor the organization as given."<sup>35</sup> A similar method can be used to think through the politics of the middle class. That is, I ask, how is a collective authority for this class produced, at the same time that the individual is produced as part of and standing apart from any such collective authority? This model of authority is especially key, since much of the hegemonic power of this class lies in being able to model what comes to look like an inherent collective individualism. Importantly, these constructions produce fissures and contradictions that extend beyond the borders of class as it is usually conceptualized. By innovating a politics of enjoyment beyond work, Indian programmers both elaborate a vision of Indian middle classness that is inflected through consumption and work discipline and produce an alternate vision of the good life that departs from this class identity.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps most interesting, middle-class eros as a trace of an alternative to the organization of life as work will not stay within the bounds of this collectivity. It remains a possibility—like the possibilities encompassed by the term *liberal freedom*—that may be taken up in other locations and hijacked to vastly different ends.

Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*, a novel about a short-term Indian IT worker on the U.S. West Coast, ends with a disappearance.<sup>37</sup> Arjun Mehta, Indian programmer, fired from his job, hiding his dismissal from his family in India, releases a supervirus in the hopes of being reinstated as the only one

who can figure out how to defeat it. When this plan fails and he ends up on the FBI's most wanted list, he disappears from a hotel room in San Ysidro, California. Although many "Mehtologists" try to track his movements, the closest they get is rumored sightings of him from time to time with the former Bollywood star Leela (after whom his virus was named) at spots on the Pacific Rim. Arjun Mehta has been claimed by autonomist groups as an anticapitalist hacktivist hero and by the right-wing press as an enemy of America. As the book ends, the main character has passed, in Kunzru's terms, from information to noise, across "the border between the known and the unknown."<sup>38</sup>

*Transmission* is a fabulist tale of the Indian IT worker as matter out of place. Arjun is someone caught between worlds and misunderstood, his bourgeois aspirations ultimately defeated by a combination of immigration law and capitalist exploitation in the form of unfair hiring practices and racialized biases. In the end, Kunzru posits an escape from the system that is also a (temporary) disruption, while the stable identity Arjun was trying so hard to create was sacrificed to the freedom of moving outside the transmission of information into the unknown. Meenakshi's disappearance, while more pedestrian, similarly comes after a defeat in the march toward middle-class respectability and remains similarly undecidable.<sup>39</sup>

Meenakshi is allied with the fictional Arjun, both mapping out a terrain on which, despite the claims for a definite message, they see a way forward in simply disappearing without leaving behind manifesto or mea culpa.<sup>40</sup> Their disappearances are a critique of current conditions of work without predetermined anarchist, autonomist, or anticapitalist content. Am I being too hopeful in my reading of disappearance as possibility? Perhaps, but my hope is not so much for this group of middle-class programmers, who seem so certain they know what Meenakshi's story requires of them, but for the present they help create and the unknowable futures they might inaugurate.

### **Coding Past and Future**

The offices that I feature in this book broadly use a human capital theory of productivity. That is, most managers considered the individual talents of their workforce and strove to make the best use of these that they could. This way of imagining life fits with a model of power that Deleuze called a "society of control," according to which power is in the management of the



given and the calculation of risk, not in the creation of particular kinds of (disciplined) subjects in institutions, or what Deleuze termed “enclosures.” Indeed, for Deleuze, it was the computer that best exemplified this form of society. “The societies of control operate with . . . computers,” he wrote, “whose passive danger is jamming and whose active one is piracy and the introduction of viruses.” In this conceptualization of control, computers produce and reflect a capitalism that is “essentially dispersive . . . deformable and transformable.”<sup>41</sup> Do those who put these machines in the service of capital—like the protagonists of this story—embody the dispersed, deformable, and transformable mode of capitalism Deleuze describes? It would be better, I think, not to read Deleuze’s essay too literally. The computer as device of control, like the panopticon as device of discipline, is a map of power, not a description of its historical workings.

Encoded in the world of corporate programming is at once the mandate to be flexible and the limit of what can be transgressed. In the first half of this book, the boundary was first set by a politics of race that naturalized what were produced differences among workers as congenital to particular kinds of marked bodies, even while what remained deformable was what the true meaning and stability of these differences would be. In the second half, the lack of fit between this racialization and the imaginary of a transnational working class led to a reconsideration of the very notion of a flexible boundary between work and life, even while it reaffirmed the logic of (now nationally coded) difference. Programmers could also engage in what could be called affective unwork, or the breaking down of the biopolitical imperative to manage life to maximize productivity that is made possible precisely because life has been presented as something that may be managed. Foreshadowing Foucault’s work on biopolitics and counterconduct, Herbert Marcuse wrote in 1966 that “in the administered society, the biological necessity does not immediately issue in action; organization demands counterorganization.”<sup>42</sup> Affective unwork might be the trace of such a counterorganization.

One final point seems relevant to thinking about the relationship of programming work and cognitive labor. Office programming culture passes through the “oikos,” or household. Angela Mitropoulos writes that “human capital theory presents individuation in the context of oikonomic inheritance, whether by way of the transmission of putatively naturalized properties (including that of ‘talent,’ predisposition, upbringing, and so on) or inherited

property in its legal and economic senses. It should also be emphasized that the category of the household is not only a place-holder for questions of the transmission of wealth along the lines of class, but also the scene of the reproduction of the demarcations of race, gender, sexuality and nation.<sup>43</sup>

Although most analyses of coding confine themselves to places where coding is done, that is, to offices, hacker conferences, coffee shops, and the like, the permeable boundary between code and areas of life not associated with programming is equally important. In this book, the boundary between home and work was in many senses redrawn over and again in attempts by various actors to come to terms with and engender proper alignments between personhood and labor. That is, by paying attention to the world of the *oikos*, it becomes clear that the constitution of Indian IT workers as particular kinds of subjects in a coding economy (and also the constitution of European, German, American, Chinese, and other workers) passes through the way the world of work is made to fit with sites of social reproduction. Too often, ethnographic studies of coding worlds, by confining themselves methodologically to sites of work, fail to make these connections.

In the end, it was this group's failure to extend to Meenakshi the credit of time that ultimately foreclosed the possibility of turning the world of corporate coding into a way to sustain *eros*. Falling back on a language of moral rectitude, they turned away from extending solidarity with the gamble against time in which they all participated past a certain limit. This limit was marked at once by Germany's migration law and by the conclusion that pretending was morally bankrupt. Here, perhaps, is the key to understanding how some kinds of programming encode the *oikos*. By setting a limit to what may be risked, tried, and pretended, such coding labor sequesters the pursuit of the good life into predictably deformable cages.<sup>44</sup> Yet here, too, might be a clue to understanding how that same encoding of class and race forges life as a project to be worked on, and unworked, in multiple ways. By vanishing beyond the limit of work, Meenakshi lights for us unexplored pathways for such a project of life.