In the great boom of the 1990s, compensation to the top level of management soared, but the wage levels of most Americans barely grew at all. This stagnation has baffled experts, but this book points to information technology (IT) as the prime cause of this growing wage disparity. Many economists, technologists and business consultants have predicted that IT would liberate the work force, bringing self-managed work teams and decentralized decision making. The book argues that the opposite has happened. Reengineering, a prime example of how business processes have been computerized, has instead simplified the work of middle and lower level employees, fenced them in with elaborate rules, and set up digital monitoring to make sure that the rules are obeyed. This is true even in such high-skill professions as medicine, where decision-making software in the hands of HMO's decides the length of a patient's stay in hospital and determines the treatments patients will or will not receive. In lower-skill jobs, such as in the call center industry, workers are subject to the indignity of scripting software that lays out the exact conversation, line by line, which agents must follow when speaking with customers. The book argues that these computer systems devalue a worker's experience and skill, and subject employees to a degree of supervision which is excessive and demeaning. The harsh and often unstable work regime of reengineering also undermines the security of employees and so weakens their bargaining power in the workplace.
This chapter examines transnational customer service work as a new touchstone of globalization and situates it within contemporary social configurations of race, gender, nationalism, and class. It first provides an overview of several histories that provide elements of the “map” to account for the remarkable growth of the Indian call center industry; these histories include the establishment of schooling infrastructure during colonial rule, state economic and immigration policies, and capital investments in the West aimed at cultivating opportunities for lower labor costs. The chapter proceeds by considering the recent growth of India's technology-related service industry in relation to the broader trends of the transnationalization of service work. It explains how the globalization of service work offers a window into the microprocesses of global economic capitalism. It also analyzes the lived experiences of call center workers and how they straddle three kinds of borders: class borders, citizenship borders, and the borders between production and social reproduction.