

Call Centres in New Brunswick Maquiladoras of the North?

BY JOAN MCFARLAND

L'auteure décrit les milliers d'emplois qui ont été créés récemment au Nouveau-Brunswick par des entreprises du secteur de technologies de pointe en communication et en information installées dans la province. La grande majorité des employés de cette industrie des « centres d'appel » sont des femmes. L'article établit un parallèle entre ces centres du Nouveau-Brunswick et les « maquiladoras » du Mexique et autres zones de libre-échange dans les pays en voie de développement.

New Brunswick Premier Frank McKenna calls them “high quality, highly skilled, high paying, pollution-free jobs.” (“Premier Challenged on Job Creation” 1). McKenna was describing the thousands of jobs that have lately been created in New Brunswick by enterprises in the high-tech communications, information, and business-service sector setting up shop in the province. McKenna and his government have been particularly successful in persuading national and international companies to set up customer-service centres using toll-free phone numbers. Most of those working in such centres are women.

Talking on the phone is not known particularly for its environmental hazards, so McKenna’s assertion that these new jobs are “pollution-free” is pretty clearly unassailable. But are they also “high quality, highly skilled” and “high paying”? In the mid-’90s, a research assistant and I have tried to find out. First, we looked at government and other documents, as well as newspaper files about the new call centres. Then we talked with a number of people involved—with corporate human resource manag-

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ers, with community college instructors who prepare workers for the new, high-tech jobs, with a union representative, Mike Crawford, who has tried to organize some of the new workplaces for the Teamsters’ Union and with workers themselves.

Talking with some call-centre workers proved more difficult than we might have expected. We approached many outside one office and made appointments to talk with them over the next few days. But that night, we received an irate call from the company’s human resources manager who said we had no right to approach the workers. None of the employees at that office showed up to talk with us at the appointed times.

Nevertheless, we managed to speak with other workers, and the picture of work in the call-centre industry that emerged was not quite as the Premier has described it. (For obvious reasons, the names of the workers will remain anonymous.)

Since 1992, over 4,000 jobs have

been created in New Brunswick by more than 30 companies establishing call-centre operations in the province.¹ The largest of them, in terms of job creation, is United Parcel Service (UPS), which has more than 1,000 people working in its customer-service and administrative centres. The smallest, a travel agency’s call centre, has created five jobs. Most have located in Moncton, Saint John, or Fredericton, although smaller communities such as Bathurst, Campbellton, and St. Stephen are now also host to call centres.

The first to be enticed to the province by the McKenna government was Purolator Courier, which set up shop in Moncton in the autumn of 1992. It presently has both a call and an administrative centre, respectively employing 260 (60 per cent of them women), and 150 (70 per cent women) people.

UPS set up its call centre in Moncton in August 1994, and then opened an accounting and customer brokerage office in Fredericton the following April. The UPS move to New Brunswick was controversial, involving both the closing of offices in Vancouver and Toronto, and a provincial government “forgivable loan” to the company of six million dollars.

Another of the new major players in the 1-800 business in New Brunswick is the Royal Bank. It opened a call centre in Moncton last September with 128 jobs, 60 per cent of them were filled by women. The Royal Bank is the only company we are aware of that has built its own centre. (All the others lease their premises.) They plan to create 700 call-centre jobs in the province by the year 2000.²

Other big names that have moved call centres to the province include IBM, Xerox, Air Canada, Canadian Pacific, and Northern Telecom, to name but a few. Typically, the ratio of managers to employees varies from about one in five to less than one in ten. (Included in the management numbers are a large number of "teamleaders," floor supervisors in charge of groups of from ten to twelve workers.)

When asked why they came to New Brunswick, company spokespersons named the high level of bilingualism in the province as the most important factor, followed by NBTel's relatively advanced telecommunications network, and the province's education system. A few mentioned the central location of the Maritimes, but only one company representative mentioned government incentives.

So far, the companies seem generally satisfied with moving their operations to New Brunswick. Many are pleased with the high number of applications received for advertised jobs. The Royal Bank, for example, had 2,000 applicants for 90 customer service positions, while the UPS office in Fredericton had 5,500 applications for fewer than 400 jobs. There were other reasons for corporate satisfaction as well—after the company's three-month trial period in Saint John, a representative of Hospitality Franchise System, and American hotel reservation service, brimmed with praise for New Brunswick workers in the *Daily Gleaner*:

We had new employees that set records for every training class... They grasped the information that we were trying to communicate better than any classes that we had ever put through, in any of our programs, at any centre. We also found in those three short months we had formed a committed and loyal team that was as driven to our success as we ever could be. "Call Centre to Stay in St. John" 1).

The only mildly negative comment about moving to the province we heard from centre managers was one company's concern about the high rate of turnover, employees moving from one call centre to another. Perhaps related to this is the fact that employees of at least one company were given a "gag order"

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requiring that they sign a "no disclosure" form regarding their wages and other working conditions.

Clearly, the provincial government's strategy of attracting these enterprises to New Brunswick has been very successful. But these companies, by the very nature of the service they provide, are national or international in the scope of their operations, and so ultimately control resides outside the province, and profits from these operations flow out of the province. The call-centre industry is, by its very nature, also quite footloose—it's a relative simple matter for a company to transfer operations from one location to another if conditions aren't to its liking. This puts any provincial or state jurisdiction anxious to attract such business in a very weak bargaining position and, for the workers involved, it means their jobs are neither necessarily permanent nor secure. The call centres are attracted to a particular location by generous in-

centives, by state-of-the-art technological infrastructure, and by the opportunity of pursuing a low-wage strategy. The incentives are expensive and lead to wasteful competition among jurisdictions. And, in today's world, other places can quickly catch up with advances in technological infrastructure.

When the idea of trying to attract these high-tech operations was first floated, it was hoped that they would hire, among others, single mothers who had been on welfare, graduates of the government's much touted NBWorks program, a three year training, work-experience project targeted specifically to this group of welfare recipients (Freeman A6). But it hasn't worked that way.

Although the coming of the call centres has done little for those on welfare, most of the jobs—our rough guess is somewhere between 60 and 80 per cent, have gone to women. Basically, their work involves answering customer inquiries and providing customer service through the companies' toll-free numbers, although many jobs have also opened up in a number of administrative centres.

The jobs, in all but one of the centres where we talked to workers, involve shift work, at a computer, in a cubicle. Most centres are open either 18 hours a day or around the clock, seven days a week.

The basic requirement for getting these jobs, according to both managers and workers we spoke with, is high-school graduation. Managers also mentioned that computer and keyboarding skills were required. Both groups agreed that personality and relevant work experience were very important as well. Bilingualism is only required for a certain number of these jobs, although bigger companies describe their workforce as being 40 per cent bilingual.

Hiring has mainly been done through newspaper ads followed by a "job fair," where from two to five interviews are conducted for each hiring. Because job applicants far

outnumber the number of available positions, the minimum job requirements mentioned above are, in fact exceeded by those hired, many of whom have some post-secondary education.

Annual pay for the workers we spoke with ranged from \$15,000 to \$25,000, with those in the administrative office paid the least. Salaries for those in the customer service is in the \$16,000-\$17,000 range. Middle-level employees at one centre we investigated were paid at a slightly higher rate, but still earned less than \$20,000 annually, while two bilingual males working in customer service received higher salaries, in the \$20,000-\$25,000 range.

Benefits in all the companies are generally good. They include life and disability insurance, a pension plan, as well as medical and dental coverage. In most cases, these are provided without direct charge to the workers, who also receive one or two weeks of paid vacation after their first year of services.

Most company spokespersons told us that the majority of their employees work full-time, but a third of the workers in the customer brokerage office work part-time—a four-hour day, five days a week. These are peak hours of the company, and one of its managers claimed that such part-time hiring is necessary in this type of work. One of the companies that hires mostly full-time people also takes on others through contracts with temporary employment agencies during peak periods of the year.

Work in the call centres is generally based on productivity quotas measured by the number of calls taken, bill processed, or taxes and duties estimated, as the case may be. Those who don't measure up receive warning letters and, if improvement isn't forthcoming, are let go. Teamster organizer Crawford told us that six workers from one centre were fired for not meeting their productivity quotas, while others have put in overtime to meet or exceed their quotas.

All the workers we talked to came to their jobs with either post-secondary diplomas or relevant work experience, and in many cases, both. When they spoke about their own jobs, much seemed to depend on the length of time they had been on the job and the particular office in which they were working. While one male em-

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ployee at a smaller centre described his job as “dynamic, never boring,” most of those we talked to described their work as “boring,” “monotonous,” and “mundane,” emphasizing the “stressfulness” and “pressure” of their jobs caused by high productivity quotas, and questioning how long they would be able to tolerate such conditions.

Although there were some exceptions, most workers complained about their low pay. And they are doubly dissatisfied in that they were led to believe—first by government spokespersons tooting their own job-creation horns and then at their job interviews—that they would be paid more. One woman, for example, was led to believe from government promises that she would be paid \$23,000 annually. She is now earning \$16,000. Another woman was told during her interview that she would be earning \$8.63 per hour, but she started out at just \$7.75 per hour.

Whereas complaints about pay are

general, satisfaction with the benefits provided by the companies is almost universal, although one woman mentioned that a monthly \$25 charge for dental and medical coverage was among the reasons she switched companies.

Workers describe their promotional opportunities as “okay” or “good.” Although none we spoke with had received a promotion, they believed that elevation to “team-leader” would be possible “if you worked hard” and “if you had the skills of a troubleshooter and motivator.” One worker felt that her promotional opportunities had been hindered by her union involvement despite her employer's assurance to the contrary.

When asked about their physical working conditions—ventilation, cleanliness, space, and lighting—workers responses were all positive—from “okay,” “good,” and “comfortable” to “great set-up.” One company spent \$9,000-\$10,000 equipping each work station. When asked about their relationships with co-workers, responses ranged from “good” to “wonderful.” However, when asked about relations with managers and supervisors, the workers' responses were mixed. Some said that relations were “good” or “good for the most part,” but a few mentioned “pressure” from supervisors and of “having them on your back all the time.” Others questioned the competence of managers, adding that they had “no faith in their abilities.”

In the spring of 1996 CBC-Radio reporter, Rachel Caves, broke a story that showed the seamier side of management in New Brunswick call centres. A manager at ICT, Pennsylvania-based business that sells insurance for such companies as The Bay, Sears, Zellers, and Esso, and which set up shop in the Saint John last January, was accused of sexual harassment. He was also accused of picking on a single mother whose baby was ill in hospital. When she asked for time off to visit her baby, he denied the request, reportedly telling her. “That

what nurses are there for.” Bob Davidson of the Saint John District Labour Council soon broke into the fray, calling the positions at ICT “sweatshop jobs.” When this story broke, ICT’s head office moved quickly to remove the offending manager and make amends with the young mother. However, when Labour Council held an information meeting on the situation, only a handful of ICT workers showed up—the company had written to each employee urging them not to attend.

On the topic of workload, workers’ responses were with only a few exceptions, negative—“heavy,” “overworked,” “stressful,” “they expect too much,” “high productivity quotas are a source of stress,” and “260 calls a day from rude and angry people... it’s hard to deal with at times.” Although some of the newer employees talked about staying at the job for the rest of their working lives, others seriously questioned how long they would be able to last:

I only plan to stay three years or so. It’s no the sort of job I want to spend my life doing.

I’m able to handle the job now, but as workers get used to the job, more will be expected. I wonder if I’ll be able to keep my job.

The Teamsters’ Union is working to organize call centre workers in New Brunswick and hopes to have them all unionized within the next five years. Several workers we spoke with offered comments about the union. Of those, people already organized were glad to be so, offering remarks such as, “Things would be bleak without the union,” “I’m glad the union is available to be on your side,” “The union will help in providing better wages and benefits and will bring everyone together as a great many voices instead of just one,” and “The union is the only way to be heard—it’s more empowering.” But a couple of workers not presently in certified bargaining units

are against having a union. One told us, “A union wouldn’t be a help right now—everything is going great.” Another commented, “Union benefits would be outweighed by union dues.”

Not surprisingly, there is resistance to unionization by the call centre companies. The Royal Bank’s

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other employees aren’t unionized and its spokesperson seemed anxious that workers at its Moncton call centre, the company’s only one in Canada, remain unorganized as well. But the union movement is meeting with some success. At the Purolator administrative centre, workers voted 85 per cent in favour of joining the Teamsters’, and a local was certified there in March of 1995. As well, in May 1996, Air Canada announced it would establish a call centre in Saint John to eventually employ 650 unionized workers. Since then, there has been a flood of applications for these positions, many of them from people currently working at unorganized centres. However, another union drive at Purolator’s Moncton call centre facility was abandoned due to organizing irregularities.

When asked of their feelings about the strategy of the government bringing call centres to New Brunswick, workers are of two minds. On one hand, they are glad for the jobs—

their own in particular. But on the other hand, they feel their jobs haven’t met their expectations, that the strategy is unfair to other parts of Canada, that the financial incentives are a misuse of taxpayers’ dollars, and most importantly, that the strategy is giving the wrong image of New Brunswick. This is how some of them put this last point:

The company feels that New Brunswick is a cheaper place in wages and benefits. They see New Brunswick as desperate, whose workers will settle for anything as long as it is a job.

I don’t like the way it’s making New Brunswick workers look, willing to work as cheap labour or twice the workload. We are made to feel lucky to have a job, but they are also lucky to have us.

[McKenna] is underselling his own people. The pay should be the same all over Canada.

[The companies] pay low wages because they know workers in New Brunswick will work for any wage.

Some of the province’s community college campuses are offering programs to train workers for the call centre industry. The Moncton campus offers three tele-service courses of different lengths, as well as a business technology program in which students can specialize in telemarketing in the second year. Unfortunately, this latter program has only 18-20 spaces per year because of the small size call centre simulation labs. Sixty per cent of the students in the tele-service courses are female and the same proportion are mature students. Seventy per cent of those in the business technology program are female.

The programs have been sponsored in a number of cases by the Canada Employment Centre, and 30 Unemployed Insurance (UI) recipients went through a twelve-week

course in Moncton in 1994. Also, a number of UI and social assistance recipients have been sponsored in the business technology program. The college claim to have a high job placement rate. One instructor claims that 75 per cent of his graduates have been hired by call centres. In the business technology program, eleven of sixteen 1995 graduates have found jobs, about half of which have salaries in the \$26,000 range.

Both the program and the courses have a work experience segment of either two or four weeks, but students receive no pay from the companies during this training. One company had asked the Moncton community college to put on a fifteen to twenty-week training course for its employees, on a contract basis.

The province's main motivation in attracting call centres to New Brunswick has been job creation. During the 1992 election campaign, Frank McKenna promised 25,000 new jobs would be created in the province (Meagher 1). By heading up sales teams across Canada and abroad, he has relentlessly pursued a strategy of bringing investment to New Brunswick and has earned a reputation as "Super-salesman Frank" (Freeman A6).

His stated goal was to create well-paying, entry level jobs for high-school graduates and those unemployed or on the welfare rolls. However, in the race to create jobs, some of these original intentions seem to have been forgotten or ignored. Very few of the new call-centre jobs are well-paying, and few have been filled by people with nothing more than high school graduation certificates, by the unemployed, or by those on social assistance—most people hired have had post-secondary education or relevant work experience. The work itself is, for the most part, stressful and full of pressure. Most of the new workers are concerned about "burnout," about how long they will be able to last without either being fired or having to leave for stress-related reasons. In most cases, train-

ing amounts to two or three weeks of classroom instruction, not all of which is very relevant. These are hardly "high quality, highly skilled, high paying" jobs.³

The workers at the new call centres appear to be the cream of the non-professional New Brunswick workforce. Although they are des-

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perately glad for their jobs, most of them are also dissatisfied, some extremely so, with them. They feel cheated by both government and the companies.

Many of those we spoke with hope unionization will improve their pay and further their interests. The Teamsters' Union does seem genuinely interested in fighting for call-centre workers and has had certain successes so far in doing so. But conflict seems inevitable as tensions build between the union and the companies, especially when one considers the role that the absence of unions played in motivating many companies to come to New Brunswick in the first place. When such conflicts come to a head, it seems certain that the province, in order to protect its investment strategy, will line up behind the companies.

The companies have obviously come to New Brunswick because of the cost savings offered to them. While the advanced telecommuni-

cations infrastructure in the province (which will soon be available more widely), and the presence of a bilingual workforce (also available in Quebec and parts of Ontario and Manitoba), may have played some role, the main drawing cards have been government incentives—including tax free 1-800 numbers, money for training, and low payroll and other taxes—combined with low wages and the relative absence of unions.

Indeed, the absence of unions is often a critical factor corporate decision-making. At one point there was great fanfare in Miramichi City over the establishment of a permanent call centre there after an eighteen-month trial period. The Premier was on hand at a press conference to make the announcement himself. What was left unsaid was that employees at the company's Toronto call centre had been on strike for almost two months before reaching a first contract, claiming that "working conditions [had] become unacceptable and at times unbearable."⁴

Community college students are not acquiring generic skills that could be transferred to other workplaces and industries. Instead, the curriculum is being set by the government-corporate strategy, and students are being trained for the needs of specific companies operating right now. This training is free of charge to the companies, which are also getting free workers while students are on the work experience portion of their courses.

The companies remain largely footloose—some have shown this by shutting down other offices before moving to New Brunswick. Almost all are also showing it by leasing premises rather than investing in their own buildings.

As we carried out our investigation of the call centre industry in New Brunswick, we were struck by certain similarities between New Brunswick call centres and the *maquiladoras* of Mexico and other free-trade zones in the Third World.

Swasti Mitter has vividly described and analyzed the characteristics of these industries and their impact on the women they employ. Transnationals are attracted to such places by the absence of tariffs and duties, and other large incentives are offered by the Third World governments involved. But the main attraction for companies operating in such places is the prospect of a docile labour force, unorganized and unorganizable. As Mitter put in her 1986 book, *Common Fate, Common Bond: Women in the Global Economy*:

It is not a coincidence that the majority of workers in the worldwide factories of the transnational corporations are women. It is not the genetic characteristics of women workers that make them the preferred labour force, but rather their marginal role in the mainstream labour movement. (13)

Certainly, there are great differences between the New Brunswick call centres and the Mexican maquiladoras and like industries. Tariffs and duties are not a factor in the communications technology sector in New Brunswick. The maquiladoras are based on light manufacturing, the call centres on communications technology. Such light industries typically require an extreme manual dexterity from workers, while call centres need only competent keyboarders.

But while there are substantial differences, the similarities between New Brunswick call centres and Mexican maquiladoras are nonetheless striking. Both are the outcome of strategies based on outside investment by footloose industries attracted by government incentives, have similarly structured workforces subject to the same worker "burnout," and involve the relaxation of laws and regulations affecting workers' health. Workers in both feel the pressures of productivity quotas.

The maquiladora workforce is

nearly 80 per cent female, while in New Brunswick call centres, it is about 70 per cent female. Most of the women in both are young. In the maquiladoras, they tend to be between the ages of 16 and 25. In the call centres, they are only slightly older; the average of those we spoke with was 27.

When production is taken to a maquiladora, laws relating to health and the environment are inevitably relaxed, with drearily inevitable results for workers. In New Brunswick, there are echoes of this in the Workers' Compensation Benefits program, wherein call centre workers receive no compensation for health problems caused by workplace stress.⁵

Finally, there is the question of the benefits that accrue to an area attracting new industries. In describing the benefits of the maquiladoras and similar free-trade zones in the Third World, Mitter might as well be speaking about New Brunswick's call centres:

What benefits do the countries get from the investment of the transnational corporations? The only benefit seems to be the creation of employment of a rather vulnerable and unbalanced nature—above all, of young women, who are willing to work at high intensity and at an extremely low wage. As soon as the tax-holidays run out in the host country, or the technology changes, or the workers show signs of militancy, the transnational corporational move away to a greener pasture. For this precarious kind of employment, women in the client countries are expected to pay a high price in terms of health hazards, social disruptions and a quasi-military discipline at the factory level. (69-70)

In the call-centre industry, Frank McKenna certainly hit on a job-creating wonder. But "wonder" cuts

two ways—one wonders whether anyone in his government has stopped to add up the economic, cultural, and human costs involved.

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¹The figures, as of 2001, are 14,000 jobs and 100 companies.

²Information from an interview with a Royal Bank official in Moncton.

³In the summer of 1996 a Montreal-based firm called DMR Group announced plans to create 90 new jobs paying in the range of \$35,000 to \$60,000 annually at two technical support call centres to be set up in Fredericton and Saint John. While this may seem to be the type of employment creation the McKenna government has been hoping for, past performance shows that the salary levels promised when new call centre jobs are announced do not always translate into reality. And there is no guarantee they will all go to New Brunswickers.

⁴Information from an interview with a union representative in Toronto.

⁵Information from an interview with a union representative in Toronto.

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TARA ATLURI

Smells Like Curry

On the front page of the *Times* of India
A little boy starves to death.

His hips and ribs protrude
As the government colludes
To build a Mickey D's
And Ronald McDonald serves Vegetable oil
To try to appease Auspicious Hindus
Who clamour and reach for pre-packaged
soy
That never quite reaches the lips of that
McFamished little boy

But wait with the farm land eroding
And baby's tummy still bloating as
America plants golden arches
Over golden Raj temples
Beef aint the only thing that stinks around
here
You see
India used to be worshipped as Mother
As Sacred cow with rolling flesh
Loving arms and heavenly breast
Now Revlon sells fair and lovely lightening
cream
And slimfast sold in supermarkets takes the
place
Of home-grown lentils and beans

And maybe she's born with it
Maybe it's just a marketing scheme.

And where have we been
Hippy tourist with rail thin frame?
Dude I went to India
And besides the diarrhea
My life will never be the same
The same
The same
We all look and sound the same
Have identical faces stench and names
Are you Radha Shamiksha Sangeeta Mo-
ammed or Apu?
No
Oh so which Cab driver quickie mart
proprietor job stealing

Doctor engineer illegal immigrant are you?
And the little brown girl in the suburbs
grown thin to escape wastes away far
away

From pictures of Fat aunties
What Hollywood says is a Paki, a coolie
woman's only fate
And Mommy and Daddy don't want little
Susie Q and Johnny Smith
To make fun of the Chapathi, Pumpadum
and Daal
They say looks Runny like war wounds and
Smells like Shit

So they feed baby fast-food fried fritters
prepared by x-cons and teen moms
made from sirloin strips of diseased beef
Plucked from a cow once worshipped as
mother
As we teach our daughters that life giving
hips and just unnecessary blubber
And India imports the Hindu Big Mac
Cause the IMF says foreign investment
encourages growth
But fuck health care
After all it's time to trim the fat

And brothers and sisters with skin as dark
as upper caste women
Starving themselves so lovely and fair
Are pumping out designer sushi and curry
for yuppie hotel chains
That fund jails
But wait
When they've eaten all our food
Then what happens to this Asian invasion?
Funny how much they love roti and raw
fish
But watch mouths and borders shut
When it's time for immigration.

And I wonder what would it be like if we
broke bread and not backs through
Minimum wage slave wage imprisoned
kitchen labour
Planted seeds not seeds of female insecurity
Shared meals not fences with neighbours

Instead of Cosmo and refried beans
Instead of size two two cents and hour two
hundred dollar jeans
We sold our children their souls in soul
food grown from the earth
Taught them to nourish their bodies from
birth

Miss India became Miss Universe
And her stick thin frame was envied by a
nation
Where middle class women diet to wear a
crown like Queen Victoria
But British raj and beauty regimes
Never stopped mass starvation

And the little brown girl who learned to
hide her colour
All her backwards traditions behind the
progress of exlax, dexitrim and poor
nutrition
Wastes away,
Body never comes to fruition
like Ripe mangoes that fall full and fresh
and fully formed
off trees in India
Where Hindus trade golden deities for
golden McNuggets
And wise Indian mamas grow forlorn
She learns that Curry stinks and her round
body is unhealthy
As starving child on world vision commer-
cial becomes a pinup girl
For the wealthy socialite women ingesting
American salad
Sucking marrow from our bones
And colour from our pallets
And curry aint even an Indian word
It's what the British made up
Cause they couldn't make sense of all our
spice
The spice they stole
Taking so much more
taking spirit from our flesh
And marrow from our bones

But somewhere in me there is a hunger that
recalls a time before
There is a deep unsatiable growl
That can't be filled by all their cabbage
soup and raw carrot sticks

Hollow name brands
Oops silly rabbit ecoli is for kids

Somewhere in me there is a hunger so deep
and wide
It can only be filled by the bones and flesh
of every fat auntie
Of every rich sauce and spice
That eats through their designer tofu
designer shakes
Designed to turn our taste buds
Not to mention out booty's white

Somewhere in me there is the spice that
some queen street hipster will market as
Monday
night Masala
A taste of the exotic
For an extra 9.95 you can have the concu-
bine Kama Sutra special
just to make it erotic
Well Fuck those culture vultures
Who would have me buy back my culture
for twice the price
Prepared by slave wagers from whom
white masters still leach labour and spice
Honey I don't need no imitation
I am the sacred cow in her full incarnation
Save your prison produced produce and
curry served up like death row sentence

If you speak the right language and your
skin's light enough
We can make it extra mild
No thank you your sloppy seconds are not
required
You see I am already Brown sugar
Sweet enough to feed every child

Tara Atluri is a Toronto-based spoken word performer. She wrote this piece a year ago while visiting her family in India. She uses poetry to connect with people and to connect small every-day struggles with larger systemic oppressions. She believes change will only happen when we start sharing our stories. Contact Tara at taralalturi@hotmail.com.