

Body, Loom and Labour.
Exploring Cotton through the Skein
of Web and Weave

Najrin Islam

Najrin Islam is an independent researcher and writer. She is a postgraduate from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), India. She takes an active interest in cinema and performance, and worked as Associate Editor for *Art Dose* magazine, Cinema edition (October 2019). She was granted the Art Writers' Award 2018-2019, which resulted in a residency and an associated publication titled *Archive as Medium: Exploring the Performative Body*.

The skin is the epidermal layer that both links and separates the body from its environment. The skin is the final layer to the organic interior, and its contact with material external to itself results in encounters, with effects on both the immediate body and extended socio-political bodies. The skin becomes the point of traffic and attributes life to its bearer while enveloping a generative mechanism of organs and actions that keep the body alive and active. The body bears in its core a pair of lungs that establishes a dialogue with air between the moments of the body's genesis and death, and reacts with external stimuli to create a conduit for the production and consumption of resources and energies, which travel across membranes and result in an osmosis of influences. What happens when they are stolen and appropriated for vested interests? Does the original body disappear? Does it persist as a spectral presence in the mutated versions of the craft? The intricacies and entanglements of these questions around the subject's body can then be seen as a "skein" – "like a length of yarn or thread wound loosely and coiled together"¹ in a tangled mass of discourses. The "skein" has been a running thread through Stefanie Knobel's oeuvre, where questions of labour, technology, and tactile interactions come together to create new permutations of dialogues across geography and time.

In her work, Knobel deals with the body through the lens of the loom – a quintessential tool of production of fabrics with a history of appropriation that marginalised the worker's body in favour of fast capital; the body was subject to a gradual institutional omission, explored further in the essay. The loom functions with the aid of longitudinal threads (called "warp") and latitudinal threads (called "weft") to produce fabric through choreographed rhythms of the artisan's body. Knobel takes this loom in both its literal and figurative potential, and crafts a series of installations and performances that explore potential dialogues between this

¹ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 8.

generative tool of production and its human operator. It brings to the fore transnational choreographies of movement through institutional mechanisms of control and dispersion. The loom then becomes central to her “skein” – that discursive yarn of the body, genealogy and intimacies irreducible to a singular deduction of its politics.

The artist attributes animate life to the material of cotton and the loom (that transforms it into fabric) by talking of them in active terms. In the historical influence it wielded in the emergence of plantations, factories, merchants, and the attendant network of trade histories, cotton has acquired a force as material and agent. The loom (which spans a diverse range, formally) is the mediator between its two forms, wherein the structural elements of the warp and the weft work in practised motion to transform the raw material into the coveted fabric. In the act of weaving the cotton, the handloom assumes life from its human operator. When the cotton industry was mechanised with the result that the frequency of its production tripled in pace and quantity, the machine loom assumed life through the collective motions that produced the fabric. Bereft of the intervention by the human hand, the machine loom became, in its standardisation, a cumulative beast, breathing and acting on an automated string of algorithms. What then happened to the weaver’s body? Did its invisibility also make it illegible?

During my first interaction with Knobel in her studio in Zurich in March 2019, I was introduced to her works that all deal with her critique of the item of cotton, studied through a neo-colonial lens. The artist’s concern with cotton grew out of a long-standing observation of how substances that come in contact with the skin have changed the skin – be it the effect of fertilisers on farmers’ bodies or the ubiquity of cotton fabrics in India.

2 Paul B. Preciado, “Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics”, in *e-flux journal* #44, April 2013 (<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/44/60141/testo-junkie-sex-drugs-and-biopolitics/>).

This strain of thinking reflects theorist Paul Preciado’s concern with the ubiquity of soft, “gelatinous biopolitical technologies” that effect molecular changes in the body. The fertiliser or the fabric of the cotton then permeate the body through the “signs, texts, and discourses” that consolidate their connection to the somatic navigations of power, control, desire, surveillance and capital.² Knobel sources the cotton for her performances from one particular place as she is hesitant to merge different kinds of cotton (and therefore different histories of production). By combining movement with research on the material of cotton, Knobel creates a new methodology of data transmission. On conducting some research, she found out that her grandparents had worked in a textile factory in the Swiss region of Thurgau in the capacity of helping hands that included plugging reels into looms. Drawing on this association, she chooses the material of cotton and studies its present modes of production that still rely on hierarchies of power (in that its production is outsourced by European nations for cheap labour). In the installation *A heavy, heavy duty*, sounds from the textile factories of Zurcher Oberland were mixed with sounds recorded by the artist at manufacturing bodies from Nagpur and Shantipur (India) as well as Jacquard handlooms across sites to create a “Textile-Disco” that created a trajectory of the evolution of cotton as both product and concept. The colonial textile history of Switzerland is thus re-narrated through its neo-colonial entanglements in an expanded timeline of sounds, while drawing attention to the collective precarity of the Global South in terms of presence and possession (of resources).

One of a series of four works, titled *Interfacing the non-*, weaves text and textile in a dialogue around technology. A piece of white woven cotton was sourced from India.

I stay nowish.

I will stay hereish.

I remain hereish.

In the third iteration of the work, these three sentences were stencilled on the walls of the Kunstkasten gallery in Winterthur (a small pedestrian glass-box perpetually available to the gaze or glance of the passer-by) in white silicon. In other renditions, the text was lasered directly onto the cotton, on which a layer of transparent silicon was applied. The fabric is then hung on different flat-screen monitors that have videos playing on loop. Each video shows the hand of the artist caressing the cotton. The movements of the hand are minimal and no extra effort is made in the direction of theatrical excess. This code of touch – both removed and designed to produce yearning – creates a new techno-sensorium, where the interface absorbs sentience from its content. A precarious gesture that induces vicarious pleasure in the action of caressing, the installation raises ecological questions around natural resources, their colonial histories and current entanglements in cross-border production politics that, amongst many, includes the Volkart Brothers.³ The words “hereish” and “nowish” also, in their rejection of certainty of emphasis, imply a transit in thought and, by extension, a geo-political slippage.⁴

Knobel has also devised a performance piece in association with this installation, titled *A manifestation for the quasi-public*, which she has performed in different versions over five times on five different occasions during 2018 and 2019. In this performance, an evaluative text comments on the body and its corporeal animations by improving on a practised set of breathing techniques. This exercise is also seen in the performance piece *hereish and*

3 The Volkart Brothers were a trading company from Winterthur in the 19th century/early 20th century, which subsequently had a major influence over the distribution of wealth through cotton worldwide.

4 Najrin Islam, “Interfacing the Non-: A Postcolonial Critique of Cotton”, in *Archive as Medium: Exploring the Performative Body*. Published by *TAKE on Art* magazine with the support of Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia, 2019, p. 19.

5 Islam (see note 4), p. 21.

6 Ardener qtd. in: Jean and John Comaroff, “Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants and Millennial Capitalism”, *Codesria Bulletin*, nos. 3 and 4, pp. 16–26, here p. 24.

nowish, which involves more performers in its *mise-en-scene*. In both pieces, the breathing exercise is meant to replicate the aural working of the loom through the use of breath, which is otherwise outside the spectrum of visibility. The (almost) structured motions of the warp and the weft, which manifest through sound, become a reference for the respiratory systems of the performers, who activate their lungs to create an affective sensorium, which draws from the motion of the workers at the loom and their relationship to the machine. It makes visible a performance system through the liaison of the textile factory worker and the performance artist. As Knobel puts it, the breathing performance then focuses attention on an “active process of degeneration while proposing to see ourselves through the perspective of our lungs”. This concern with cotton (and its attendant network of industries) thus manifests in the performances and installations through an integration of biology, affect, and cultural memory.⁵

The discursive capacity of the work manifests itself through a formal politics that seeks to work through multiple temporalities. With every work in Knobel’s oeuvre, the body participates in a new logic of time. The particular space created through movements and extra-linguistic dialogues becomes the conduit through which the subjectivity of the human body is negotiated. The performance begins with a marked stillness, as a progressive realisation and simultaneous dissolution of the body into a hyper-animated entity through variations in the use of breath unfolds before the viewer’s eyes. The performers in *hereish and nowish* carry not cotton but the labour of their breath, bearing the phantom of a systemic violence engendered by a demand for extractive capital; their breath then carries “the visceral implications of the factory, the plantation (and) the market...”.⁶ The labour of the breath here is not directly subsumed by capital; in this refusal, do the bodies of the performers inadvertently create a disruptive solidarity? The visually futuristic figure of the body in the performance also evokes mediated memories of similar representations in science fiction;

and in their choreographed sequences of breathing, they evoke an ambient aural-scape which serves to posit “absent” voices against master narratives officiated by the linear and monologic character of History. A precondition to movement, breathing becomes a score for the performance piece, where the body is recalibrated in its capacity to simulate the corporeal workings of the weaver; the performer then comes to embody a historical omission.

One thinks of Sadie Plant’s discussion of the loom and the history of weaving in this respect, which essentially establishes a connection between weaving and coding. Published in 1997, the text focuses on how coding, especially in view of the Jacquard loom, was a way of visualising information for use by multiple bodies. Using a punch card system (thick, white paper punctured with holes in designated spots) as a way to archive information, the loom lent itself to replication, resulting in technical efficiency that resulted in an industrial revolution on a global scale. Designed in 1805, the Jacquard loom was capable of weaving very complex and detailed patterns in a fraction of the time that a manual weaver took to create the same product. Cotton was thus made available to a new class of middle-class consumers, and cotton products were no longer reserved for the wealthiest in a society. This cheap, efficient production of patterned textiles radically changed maritime histories around cotton trade.

Soft, durable, lightweight, easy to dye and easy to clean, cotton emerged as a valuable commodity that resulted in wide-spread domestication of the plant, resulting in improved breeding. This effectively altered the biological history of cotton, which accelerated the emergence of a whole “empire

⁷ Sven Beckert, “The Rise of a Global Commodity”, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015, p. 7.

of cotton”.⁷ The forces of globalisation have effected myriad transformations in global trade networks. In South Asian countries, globalisation has had a particularly distinctive history in terms of how small-scale industries have resisted and simultaneously co-existed with the collapse of boundaries that globalisation entailed. These histories produce a range of narratives pertaining to the body (both of the individual and of the peoples) that has traversed an adaptive pattern of a global-local dialectic of identity, subjectivity and experiences, resulting, as a consequence, in a subterranean space for the production of the spectral in its resistance to any easy comprehension of its politics.

The spectral connotes a residue, where a former life has persisted as presence in a space that cannot accommodate it in its normative forms anymore. Knobel’s performances channel the spectral presence of the loom, which claims space through the performative bodies in a different spatio-temporal axis. The bodies of the performers occupy isolated pockets of space before interacting with each other in intermittent routines; they experience heavy circuits of desire, memory, and sensory affect that threaten any unity of being. The spectral is channelled in the works through affective regimes (whether in flesh or through screens) where the uncanny constitutes the history of the disjointed experiences of postcolonial modernity. In *hereish and nowish*, breathing becomes a mediating act between a disintegrating environment and its inhabitant. The bodies generate shifting tableaux and signify an evolutionary point where the organic has assimilated the mechanic. Their interface produces a new history, where the sensory distress of the bodies is channelised through space and sound, which impress the affective value of the interaction on the spectator. Rejecting romantic transcendence (and biologically-designated sex, or encoded gender), the performer’s body remains in transition; in its queer ontology, the body becomes an unpredictable and ungovernable form in its abandon of norm. Its choreography around breath evokes a malleability that enables techno-digital

embodiments; porous entities that etherise into the digital as well as they solidify in the physical, while traversing an entire spectrum of material translations in between. The body registers data, and becomes a fertile site for the production of the spectral; the old loom has not disappeared yet.

The Jacquard loom⁸ belonged to an era prior to the advent of the digital, where physical representations of coded data on cards were used to transform complex geometric patterns into fabric. The use of the binary logic of Zeroes and Ones in the Jacquard loom represented a revolution in human-machine interaction and pre-empted the way modern computers function. In Plant's view, technology is fundamentally female. In the early optimism promised by the internet in the 1990s, Plant argues how the practice of weaving and the space of the web can be conceptually braided to think about virtual spaces that engender bodies as complex intersections of materiality and meaning. The Zero of the binary code has always been seen as the O-ther, as "nothingness", and as "female" against the phallic counterpart of One. Plant points out that in psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's opinion, weaving and women are intimately connected in that this predominantly feminine practice is a mimetic reproduction of the natural matrix of pubic hair designed to compensate for the female lack, represented by the void of the womb. This "lack" has been tangentially used to justify "deviant" behaviour by women,

8 A 19th-century British mathematician, Charles Babbage, took inspiration from the loom to develop a theoretical all-purpose computer, which was dissected and studied by Ada Lovelace who was, as Sadie Plant asserts, historically the first computer programmer.

9 Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2018, p. 54.

10 The painting hangs in a hallway of University Paris Descartes and belongs to the Musée de l'histoire de la médecine.

including hysteria – a pathology that was attributed exclusively to the female sex (or, the sex that is not One). Plant observes a connection between the anarchic, self-organising qualities of cyberspace and Freud's hysterical women. The decentralised distribution of ideas in cyberspace is analogous to the free flow of neural connections and intuitive leaps seen as symptoms of hysteria; the deviation implied by the disorder was now read as the norm of the feminised future. Digitisation divorces Zero from its association with absence and becomes a generative point for new connections instead. The Zeroes and Ones of the loom can then be viewed in departure from their hetero-patriarchal connotations; Zero, as the quintessence to calculation, becomes a possibility for all Ones and consequently undermines their privilege with its capacity to conceptually proliferate. Even today, the image of the angry woman (a manifestation of female rage against the rising visibility of cases of sexual harassment) in popular media is infantilised or dismissed as "hysterical" in common parlance despite the established legitimacy of the anger because the sight of a woman "opening her mouth with volume and assured force [...] is coded in our minds as ugly".⁹ It is then appropriate that in her latest rendition of *hereish and nowish* in Paris in 2019, Knobel used the original version of the famous painting *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière* (1887) by André Brouillet¹⁰ as backdrop and context. The painting shows neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot giving a clinical demonstration of hysteria to a group of post-graduate students using a female patient in a theatrical setting at the eponymous institution. The video, based on a performative intervention, *L'OPOPONAX*, then draws on the historical treatment of the female body, while evoking the spectre of the political position it occupied in relation to technology. The internet has become a more complex and darker space since the techno-feminist upheaval of the 1990s of which Plant was a part, with concerns around invasion of privacy, surveillance, and deep-fake technology running alongside positive instances of solidarity amongst marginalised bodies through expansive digital networks. In such a landscape, the weave of the web acquires a cumulative

complexity where the Zero expands into a connective mesh of non-binary subjectivities that complicate notions of gaze, control, and veracity. In a posthuman scape, where the dichotomies between mind and body, and biology and machine, are challenged, gendered identities are reconfigured or annihilated in favour of a fluid occupation of bodies. When binary epistemology is challenged, categories dissolve, and power is redistributed across bodies as the dissolution transforms into equivalence of value. It is a queer future, then, defined by an irreducible multiplicity of desires and dissident sexualities, where the extant categories of male and female are rendered null.

The act of weaving “reduced everything to simple actions”, argues Plant,¹¹ where the limbs of the weaver are integrated into the processes of the machinery; the weaver’s autonomy and control was now lost to the automated loom entirely, resulting in a concrete loss of agency and error. As Scott Bukatman points out, the very physical unity of the body is destabilised when it starts to share its characteristics with the machine. He talks about how the “rhetorics of superimposition and the language of science fiction (are used) to express the postmodern crisis of a body that remains central to the operations of advanced capitalism as a *sign*, while it has become entirely superfluous as *object*”.¹² That is, in cyberspace, the body loses its physical autonomy and is reconstituted instead as free-floating units of data. In *Interfacing the non-*, the distance between the physical body and the digital realm is compressed to its bare minimum, effecting therefore a shift in the understanding of the human as a species and

11 Sadie Plant, “The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics”, *Body & Society*, SAGE 1995, vol. 1 (3–4), pp. 45–64, here p. 51.

12 Scott Bukatman, “Introduction”, in *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 16.

13 Bukatman (see note 12), p. 19.

14 Comaroff (see note 6), p. 19.

15 Plant (see note 11), p. 52.

16 Comaroff (see note 6), p. 21.

17 Comaroff (see note 6), p. 24.





hereish and nowish, 2017

the human as a state of *being*. In this case, as Bukatman argues, the digital has effectively replaced the tactile so that communication assumes the character of tactical simulation. The digital is used to mobilise this spectral quality on the screen, constructing consequently through its own “techno-organic reconstructions of the flesh”¹³ a paraspace for the extra-linguistic touch.

Jean and John Comaroff argue how capital, in the current global capitalist economy, assumes the character of a “natural yield of exchange and consumption” independent of human labour. This, per the Comaroffs, lends capital a “spectral” capacity of self-conjuring; such a valuation of capital, in turn, results in a severe devaluation of the human labour involved so that the body assumes the character of a zombie in its incapacity to articulate its oppression. The globalisation of the division of labour, they argue, reduces the worker to “the lowest common denominator (of) a disposable cost”.¹⁴ Here, one thinks of the spinner and the weaver, whose artistry was appropriated by the machine loom and subsequently standardised for mass production and consumption. The Jacquard loom enabled “an unprecedented simulation of memory”¹⁵ where the manual weaver could be excised from the act and their artistry retained and capitalised upon. The body of the indigenous weaver is caught at the crossroads between a fast-receding past and a changing present being violently swept along by the whims of a vertical authority. The weaver is reduced to a form of “ghost labour”¹⁶ – as a mere instrument of production, afflicted as they are by a refusal to acknowledge their presence in the global capitalist economy which, instead, attempts to eclipse the labour by creating the immersive illusion of perpetual consumption (the source of the abundance made conveniently inexplicable as the accomplishment of an “invisible hand”). These weaver-bodies, born of the colonial encounter of the local economy in the Global South with its imperial counterparts, are victims of the resultant rupture between persons and place, the individual and the communal, and past and future.¹⁷