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Introduction

In 2013, Drik, a visual arts agency in Dhaka, Bangladesh, undertook the ambitious project of conjuring from centuries of extinction the storied cotton muslin for which the city was once famed. While Pliny notes the exportation of Bengal muslin as early as 77 CE in his *Naturalis Historia*, testifying to the long life of the commodity, it was in fact perfected for the Mughal court. That cloth, nearly pellucid in its fineness, became one of the most valued global objects as it circulated across Europe to fill trousseaus and garb an imperial elite in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nine yards of it folded into a matchbox were said to have been presented to Queen Victoria in honor of her wedding. Known as *bafta hawa*, or woven air, *Dhakai* (from Dhaka) muslins carried in their vaporous weave the name of a place that became synonymous with the artistry and magic of their manufacture. True muslin has not been manufactured for nearly two centuries—popular apocrypha of its disappearance contends that the British, unable in Manchester mills to approach its quality, amputated the thumbs of master weavers.¹ Today, it largely appears in museum displays, trapped behind glass so as to avoid contact with the bodies that it was made for but that now threaten its material integrity. It is preserved in private collections and as family inheritance, passed down between women and repurposed into new forms.

In attempting to retrieve muslin, to restore it to the Bangladeshi nation and a global economy, Drik encountered its paradoxical allure. Its value as a commodity derived from the enigma of its becoming, the irreconcilability of the technology of its manufacture and its actual object life. How could cotton spun by hand and woven on bamboo come to be finer than gossamer, so diaphanous as to

almost disappear? And yet be so durable as to outlast the memory of its making by so many years? Hyperartisanal, muslin, though “handmade,” disappeared the body of its manufacturer. Historical accounts of the fabric can only attribute its “almost incredible perfection” to the possibility that it may have been the “work of fairies or insects, rather than of men.”² The touch of no mere human hand, it seemed, could produce cloth so numinous; as a result, the object has been shorn of the site and labor of its making. But Drik’s hope of muslin’s return fundamentally depended on the promise of that touch: that having been handmade, the fabric might be made again by hand.

Though the courtly weavers who are credited with producing the cloth were male—participants in a hereditary occupation in which the precise alchemy of muslin production was passed down from master weaver to son—the process by which muslin came into being was permeated by the touch of female hands from seed to cloth. *Dhakai* muslin is an object of a particularly feminine economy of labor and consumption. Only master weavers knew all aspects of the process, for fear that proprietary techniques would be stolen, but the muscle memory of its fabrication was distributed throughout a kin network. Women of those households engaged in intimate contact with the material life of cotton. From sowing cotton seed to handpicking bolls to spinning, pigmenting, and starching thread to embroidery, their labor was central to the production of a fabric that would travel across the imperial world as a conjugal commodity. John Forbes Watson, in his 1866 *Textile Manufactures and the Costumes of the People of India*, notes that the most fabled aspect of muslin—the fineness of its thread—came from the hands of women under the age of thirty (not in keeping with our contemporary notion of the aged spinster) who spun “early in the morning before the rising sun dissipates the dew on the grass.”³ Watson locates the essence of muslin’s magical constitution in the touch of young women, in the glancing contact of their fingers twisting filaments barely endowed with enough moisture from the morning dew to be perceptible to the eye. Bound in the fibers of fabric that would be layered into bridal gowns and courtly vestments alike was the somatic trace of those young women; their bodies came to constitute the substance of the mythical cloth alongside cotton, starch, and dye. Particulate remains of touch adhere to fabric weave, carrying in the textile remnants of laboring forms to be pressed against, to exfoliate and accumulate from, the body of the wearer. In this way, we might say that a corporeal memory of muslin abides even now in the bodies of women by and for whom it was made, despite its disappearance from a commercial marketplace.

In the same year that Drik began its muslin project, in May 2013, just twenty kilometers away from its offices, the Rana Plaza commercial building in Savar collapsed, killing nearly 1,200 garment workers inside. The sixth major disaster

at a Bangladeshi garment factory, Rana Plaza is to date the deadliest factory incident in history. As the death toll rose, bodies of young women, who comprise 85 percent of the ready-made garments labor force, were lined up along the corridors of a local high school to be identified. Images of the demolished building and of the casualties circulated through the international media, galvanizing consumer outrage in the United States and the United Kingdom in particular, where the majority of the clothing made in the factories was sold at Gap, H&M, Wal-Mart. Vibrant cloth—the concatenation of manufactured apparel and clothing on human remains—was laminated by concrete rubble, a final fusion of laborer to commodity. Common comparisons between Rana Plaza and the New York Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911 collapsed time and histories of labor exploitation into a singular failure of liberal rights wherein Bangladesh became the uncanny echo of a prior moment of Western industrial development and progress. Bangladesh, it would seem, never fully shares in the modernity of global capital, even as it clothes it. Because the garments sector is credited with Bangladesh's recent economic growth and signals the potential for the country to wean itself off the international aid apparatus on which it has depended since its independence in 1971, the predominance of women's bodies at Rana Plaza (in the building wreckage and at its periphery as witness) embodied for a consumer public in the Global North the gendered cost of the cheap cotton knit apparel that rested as second skin on their own bodies, just as it rested on the dead bodies of workers in the building.

Like the historical *Dhakai* muslin, contemporary machine-woven cotton bears in its fiber the somatic sign of touch from its manufacture. Far tighter in its warp and weft structure than its handwoven kin, this cotton does not announce its proximity to the manufacturing body as did muslin or the handloomed cotton (*khadi*) popularized by Mohandas K. Gandhi during the Indian nationalist movement; those fabrics, by design, distance the textile through its touch—muslin too ethereal for human skin and *khadi* markedly rough—even as they vouchsafe the historical trace of the hand. Mill-cotton's technological feat is that it so closely resembles the skin it rests upon. (Cue Calvin Klein's coy acknowledgment that "Nothing gets between you and your Calvins.") "Ready-made," the garments that are now the referent of Dhaka in a contemporary global imagination are disembodied as their local predecessors had been. No human hand appears in the image of these machinic, ubiquitous textiles, once again shearing from cloth the labor and site of its making. But through the rupture of disaster in 2013, the manufacture of this cloth announced itself.

Beyond the coincidence of shared location and time, these fabric phenomena—these objects that do not appear to be of a shared aesthetic order—are bound in a common lineage of the non-normatively reproductive and insistently political

life of women's labor in East Bengal (modern-day Bangladesh). From *Dhakai* muslin to *khadi* to ready-made knitwear, cotton fabric materializes an intimate history of touch that ranges both British and American empires. Placed alongside literary text, archival encounters, and other material objects, these textiles tell a new story of political imagination and commitment from the standpoint of East Bengal, a space both foundational to, and excluded from, familiar conceptions of postcolonial studies—and one in which women are central political actors and laboring subjects.

As metaphor, textiles have a rich, and markedly feminine, citational life from mythology to Deconstruction.⁴ Derived, in English from the Latin *texere*, *textile* and *text* share the etymology “to weave”; this is the same branch that gives us *techne* in the derivational tree rooting itself in the Sanskrit *taksati*, meaning “shaper” or “fabricator.”⁵ Penelope weaving and unweaving the sign of her own widowhood; Arachne and Athena set against one another to render in fabric the stories of the gods; Freud's diminutive sense of women's invention of weaving and plaiting as prostheses of phallic lack; Jacques Derrida on feminine writing in the face of radical finitude, “You're dreaming of taking on a braid or a weave, a warp or a woof, but without being sure of the textile to come, if there is one, if any remains and without knowing if what remains to come will still deserve the name of text, especially of the textile in the figure of a textile.”⁶ Textile opens itself up into writing, into being rendered into writing, into making legible. But this book militates against the impulse to stabilize narrative by way of the metaphoric life of textiles. Rather, it returns to Marx and his concerns about what of the history of human labor is denuded in the commodification of the object: that “as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness.”⁷ *An Empire of Touch* refuses object transcendence as a discursive practice, investing instead in a practice of immanent sensuousness: not just what a body can do, or what a body can make, but the host of social relations and somatic practices that communicate by way of touch. Thus, over five chapters, this book develops a set of reading practices committed to materiality which read for the presence of human labor, for what is intimate and tactile. Despite abstractions and atrophies by which the manifest presence of labor would seem to be effaced from objects, an accumulative, tangible relationality persists within and beyond that of exchange. Historically, our conception of labor has been mediated by two abstractions. The first is of the touch of work itself, effaced in the object made commodity; the second is of the gendered body, personalized and domesticated. But what seems to disappear in fact has a material—indeed, textile—life. I look to touch to bring to the surface the materiality and intimacy of labor. This is a form of reading predicated upon and transcending the critical diagnoses of absence and failure that have historically marked East Bengal and (post)colonial women both.

Beginning with the 1905 division of the British colonial state of Bengal into East and West—the fault line along which the region would again be split in 1947 and nationalized in 1971—this book traces the fissures of a colonial policy of gendered partition that long outlived the Raj. East and West Bengal's partition in 1905, I contend, is in fact the uncoupling of text from textile. From it, West Bengal inherits the humanistic legacy of literature and historiography; East Bengal inherits a world of objects, raw material, and embodied labor. In the wake of 1905, West Bengal and the Indian nation-state to which it eventually came to belong are set up to offer an intellectual genealogy of political becoming; East Bengal and its future Bangladesh state-form come to be the repository of touch. Contemporary industrial labor of female garment workers in Bangladesh bears the mark of that attempt to disaggregate the site of politics, figured as masculine and modern West Bengal, from the feminized and ancestral site of natural resources in East Bengal, even as the relationship between the two lobes of the region remains co-constitutive and intimate.

Bengal, in this way, comes to be historically and disciplinarily cleaved in two. Indeed, for all of the scholarly attention to Bengal in history and literary studies, East Bengal has been a curious lacuna: subsumed under the sign of a unified Bengal, romanticized as the spectacularly maternal source of raw material and poetic feeling that fed an urban political intelligentsia in West Bengal, or disavowed as a ghostly remnant of a prior India. Scholarship, too, has been divided between the qualitative work of postcolonial studies, which has long faced claims of Indocentrism, and the densely quantitative methodologies of development economics that have characterized studies of and interventions in Bangladesh. Since 1971, when it was declared (in a phrase apocryphally attributed to Henry Kissinger) “an international basket case,” Bangladesh has received nearly \$50 billion in foreign aid, of which nearly half has been in the form of loans. Its now-lauded progress toward middle-income country status has proved it an exemplar of a development state. In its case, growth and modernization have been driven not by state enterprise and domestic capital investment but by gender-targeted foreign aid and nongovernmental organizations. It is precisely these gender-targeted policies and programs that Amartya Sen has recently credited for the fact that Bangladesh now ranks higher in human development indices (what he terms markers of qualitative well-being) than India.⁸ Women's reproductive health, literacy, life expectancy, and income—measures of their *empowerment* (to use the neoliberal buzzword with which we will hope to dispense by the end of this book)—are, in this way, vehicles of individual and national mobility. Since the Grameen Bank was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for its microloan programs aimed at rural Bangladeshi women, its model of collateral-free, high-interest, socially regulated loans has been exported to

dozens of countries. Thus, Bangladesh's two major global exports of ready-made garments and gender-targeted microfinance are today intimately tied to its representative women.

Over the more than a century on which this book focuses, East Bengal persists within the ambit of two empires: the British colonialism by which it was originally bifurcated and the American empire of debt on which its statehood was erected. By taking as our focus this East Bengal, irreducible to either colonial forebear or contemporary state, the intellectual and ideological continuity between discourses that produce and sustain definitions of the postcolonial nation and its political possibilities comes into stark relief. We see the endeavor of postcolonial sovereignty and the claims of its stillbirth in a fresh light.

The bodies and labor of East Bengali women uphold global projects of intervention and quantifications of development on the one hand and symbolize reproductive national futurity on the other—passed on from one imperial form to another. To interrupt the insidiously depoliticized homology between women and nation which the familiar historical nationalist iconography of *Banga/Bharat Mata* (Mother Bengal/India) repeats, this book focuses on unruly feminine subjects: virgins, spinsters, childless widows, unwed mothers, factory workers.⁹ Through their writing, labor, and articulations, these women model a radical mode of relational self-conception in which political liberation is inextricable from personal cathexis.

A Problem of Reading and Its Objects

An Empire of Touch turns to the symbolic and material labor of women in East Bengal—on which the state-building endeavors of three countries (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) have depended—to argue that the life of political commitments of women, figural and historical, is captured in material objects of their manufacture. It takes on a basic methodological dilemma of postcolonial studies: despite the centrality of women's labor to anticolonial protest and postcolonial state-building, historiography has struggled with what appears to be an absence in the archive, born of the ostensible division between a public masculine world of politics and a private feminine world of culture, domestic life, and kinship. In this frame, feminized East Bengal and women's political labor are each elided. This book insists on their appreciability, calling for a continually generating archive of presence. In text and object, we see forms of political life that break through the false binaries of self and other; domestic and industrial; individual and collective; affective and material. Navigating what at times feel

like entirely incompatible hermeneutic discourses—the humanistic and the social scientific—reveals their continuities and the potential interdisciplinary ground opened by their shared use. Fundamentally, this book is engaged in an ongoing struggle to locate a satisfactory vocabulary and paradigm for forms of political subjectivity expressed and embodied by those who, by virtue of gender, nation, class, and empire, have been considered subaltern. When I make a claim for the political character of material and symbolic labor by Bengali women living in the imperial shadow, I identify relational commitment to common good and shared futurity that does not take agency and sovereignty as its determinant. Though it has not always fallen under the sign of the political, this labor is politics in an elemental way; let us call it so.

A guiding question throughout will be how technologies of representation, be they literary, historical, material, or economic, engage forms of political life beyond masculinist projects of individual and national autonomy that undergird familiar conceptions of postcolonial political modernity. Moreover, to what archives do we turn if those of the state appear to foreclose the very basis of this question? *An Empire of Touch* looks to institutional and discursive sites from which the subject of a modern postcolonial political order has been articulated and challenged—law, labor, the psyche, the archive, and the global market—to show how women make their bodies and the objects of their production into signs of political commitment. Each of the objects in this book—archival fragments, photographs, correspondence, handloomed cotton, figurines, novels, ashes, embroidered quilts, jersey knit, artisanal handicrafts—reveals the intimate, tactile, and yet determinedly public and relational practices by which the postcolonial nation is imagined and fabricated into being.

Objects, particularly those manufactured by human hands, are central to the emergence of the autonomous subject in liberal political thought. Lockean distance between made-object and making-person is the stage on which dramas of individual sovereignty, rationality, and subjectivity are played out, particularly in postcolonial contestations over labor and rule. It is therefore in those objects, at these sites of subject-negotiation, that we see how women produce the terms of their own politics and self-conception; we see how the articulation of desire by women makes itself known. The idiom and form of their commitment are not singular. Indeed, the full feature of a deeply relational politics of the self and of the nation begins to emerge through the multiple, sometimes contradictory, sometimes overlapping investments of the figures engaged by this book—from the fictional to the world-historical; from revolutionary women to raped children; from Nobel laureates to wage laborers.

Although the book's historical origin is 1905, it begins *in medias res* with the 1932 death of Pritilata Waddedar, a twenty-year-old schoolteacher who killed

herself after leading an attack on the Pahartali Railway Club in Chittagong, East Bengal. In a theoretical gambit to the book's abiding question of the legibility of female political subjectivity, we open by reading Waddedar as a theorist of her own historicity. The first chapter, which constitutes part I of this book, responds to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's canonical question of whether the subaltern woman's voice can be heard in the historical archive by arguing that Waddedar, dressed in the cotton garb of a Muslim man, left her body as a sign that was meant to be as legible as the manifesto found inside her pocket which stated, "I boldly declare myself a revolutionary." What comes to be communicated, in her writing and by her body, surpasses the merely mimetic. Beyond representation, there is articulation through touch and intimacy. The problem of reading Waddedar's actions, the ways in which she has been renarrated and unspoken, gets to the crux of the gendered terms of what and who can be political. It is a problem to which we will return in the final chapter in essays written by women currently working in the garment industry, whose continuing labor has been figured on a global stage as unqualified exploitation. In a very different idiom, in a very different historical moment, we see restaged that canonical debate of postcolonial female political subjectivity; articulations of desire make themselves legible outside of the singular framework of liberal selfhood.

If at stake in the encounter with Pritilata Waddedar is a problem of reading historical evidence of feminine forms of political protest, then the two chapters of part II, "The Fetish of Nationalism," turn to the problem of objects and subjectivity, the perceived threat of material overattachment to psychological and political projects of autonomy. Drawing out a broad history of women's political work in East Bengal during the rise of nationalist movements following the 1905 partition, these chapters engage three historical darlings of the postcolonial and Western canon: M. K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sigmund Freud. When Tagore condemns the Gandhian practice of spinning cotton thread by hand as a technique of postcolonial resistance, he calls the handloomed *khadi* it produces a fetish: a manufactured (made by hand) object that threatens the sovereignty of its maker. Nonetheless, in chapter 2, we see that even in the most canonical examples of Indian anticolonial imagination, the fetish performs an apotropaic magic that enables forms of affiliation and attachment that do not privilege the nation but instead draw together the local and the global in a shared anticolonial project. Feminine labor and its made-objects are herein the grounds of postcolonial possibility. When, in chapter 3, we return to Tagore's critique of nationalism in his 1916 novel *The Home and the World*, we encounter materiality as that which derails the symbolic economy of women as metaphors in psychoanalysis and politics both. Bimala, the young housewife at the center of Tagore's novel, models a politics of affinity and intimacy through an

embodied and material identification with rural East Bengal. By following an ivory statuette of Vishnu, given to Sigmund Freud by the Indian Psychoanalytic Society, this chapter traces an emergent bilingualism in which the conditions of anticolonial political possibility were articulated in the patois of a psychological subjectivity.

Cotton cloth, a critical technology for Gandhian *satyagraha* (a program of nonviolent resistance) and the *swadeshi* nationalism born of the 1905 partition, appears again in the final part, “International Basket Case.” Now in the hands of two precarious figures of the postcolonial world—women raped during the Bangladesh war of independence and then “rehabilitated” through training as artisanal textile producers, and contemporary female garment workers—fabric becomes the vehicle of a new economic and political order. Returning to the archive with which the book began, chapter 4 traces, through rumors of fire, the calculus of legibility that governs what constitutes feminine political labor. Named war heroines, *birangonas*, by the new republic, women raped in the 1971 war were asked to bear the weight of both a disappearing archive and a nationalist narrative. Like their very bodies, the textile work they were offered as occupational therapy following the war becomes a central example of a new developmental discourse of Third World women’s empowerment. In the final chapter, we see how the material kinship between this artisanal manufacture and the contemporary garment work for which Bangladesh is today vilified and undercompensated reveals the imbrication of aesthetics training and tactile labor through which women articulate themselves.

Standing at the scholarly impasse between an ethical project of marking subaltern silence and a historical project to recover women’s hidden agency, it is clear that we need new frameworks for feminist and postcolonial analysis. In anchoring itself, even and especially as critique, to a Western paradigm that takes the subject/object divide as epistemological, postcolonial studies has averted its gaze from an extant archive of materiality. Hence, this book follows the historical traces of how Bengali women have claimed their labor, making what has too often been seen as “merely” intimate and domestic into appreciable political acts. What emerges is a landscape of political life marked by interdependence and relationality, offering a narrative beyond that of women’s empowerment and independence as the postcolonial enterprise. Across historical time, these women consistently refuse critical and cultural pronouncements of their own subjugation and underdevelopment. Methodologically, this book traverses culture and politics to locate in the mundane stitching of cloth clarion calls of anticolonial resistance and self-articulation; it presses on the theoretical limits of sovereign subjecthood; it looks beyond the rights-based discourse of personhood and possibility; it offers forms of reading that undo the division

between agency and articulation; it extends the spaces in which we might go seeking political labor and its traces.

An Empire of Touch is based on the premise that the molecular residue of East Bengal and the political labor of women are always present in our conception of empire and its resistances. Drawing their presence to the surface challenges the foundational postcolonial narrative of what Indian Subaltern Studies historian Ranajit Guha has called the “historic failure of the nation to come to its own.”¹⁰ This failure, for Guha and other members of the Subaltern Studies Collective, is both of political imagination to conceive of a truly postcolonial future and of nationalist historiography to account for “the politics of the people.”¹¹ At stake is not the ideological question of whether alternate forms of politics flourished despite their marginalization in elitist historiography, but rather the empirical question of where and in what forms those politics might be located. It would seem that women limn the periphery of the colonial archive, appearing as disruptions, incoherences, and excesses, the nature of their political lives operating in a correspondent but obscured world. I take their appearance as a rupturous announcement: an invitation to broaden our critical field of vision.

From the new perspective of the gathered object-archive of this book, a psychoanalytically oriented form of feminist critique of postcolonial political life is as much about the development of a subject of this order as it is about the production of that subject’s structural referent, the nation. Therefore, this book makes a claim for a political and economic life constituted by touch, from a context in which the interdiction against touch, in the form of the social policing of caste and religion, was often the basis of the social. Here, I lean upon, or reach toward, Erin Manning’s textured sense of the gestural political possibilities of touch, in which “[t]ouching you, I begin to write a corpus that defies the Aristotelian *polis*. This corpus tells a story, plural but not like-minded, of bodies reaching out toward one another, a story of the separation and sharing of bodies, of the transposition of the being-body, multiple, always in excess of its-self, excribed within a corpus I can never quite articulate.”¹² In postcolonial political life, the touch of empire—its material, psychic, epistemological, and political contact—is tattooed into the skin of that corpus. It evinces a form of postcolonial imagination in which the politics of liberation is inextricable from the labors of contact; in which intimate, relational practices of self-articulation are the basis for nation-making.

A Gandhian ideal of purification through tactile labor, weaving a material and metaphoric national fabric out of onanistic self-touching, holds pride of place in a postcolonial imagination. But it is, ultimately, a fantasy that operates against the lived reality of fabric production and use: what we see, entangled in the fiber of textile, is that the touch and labor of its manufacture are communitarian, self-dissolving practices. What we see is a politics of touch that manufactures a

body politic through accumulation and contact. To be touched is to be made and unmade in relationship to another, another's body, another's desire, another's trace. Given the profuse character of touch, this book pins itself to three terms as a conceptual framework: *contingency*, *cathexis*, and *desh* (nation or home). Taken together, they help us understand the encounter between bodies and objects as a negotiation with technologies of representation that govern the legibility of political work. Individually, each captures a register of touch: somatic, material, psychic, affective.

The Apparitional and the Ancestral Bengal

At the heart of this book is the apparitional form of a nation whose persistent appearance ruptures postcolonial chronospace. As an apparition, East Bengal comes into being as a political, ideological, material, and aesthetic category through its own negation. Only when Bengal is partitioned and then reunited, and partitioned once more, does East Bengal come into sensuous self-appearance. I continue to refer to East Bengal across the historical arc of this book in order to trace what it reveals in its resurgence and reappearance. Jacques Derrida writes, in *Specters of Marx*, "The specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some 'thing' that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter. There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reappearance of the departed."¹³ East Bengal's becoming, or more specifically, its manufacture, is a double movement by which its appearance and then its resignification disclose the labors that bring the postcolonial nation-state into being and what cannot be compelled into its form. East Bengal connotes, too, all that did not come to pass: speculative futures and forms of life that appear now under the sign of failure—failed states, failed politics, failed subjects. Rather than romanticize absence or rehearse postcolonial melancholia, I want to suggest that the touch of East Bengal across time and space, its ability as an ideal and a material figure to effect and mobilize commitment, and its political force are the invocation of a nation that never was and thus might still be.

East Bengal is the name for a site of inquiry that is both and neither the India-hued Bengal of postcolonial historiography and literary studies nor the Bangladeshi laboratory of postwar international development. Like the partition which, even after being annulled, reappears as object of memory, East Bengal

refuses to fall away in the face of postcolonial geopolitics. I call it East Bengal to invoke the incomplete and resurgent becomings of this place and its history, to mark the possibilities and futures that it conjured which did not come to have a material life, to approach it as a speculative vision of political cathexis. *Cathexis*, the term James Strachey translates into English from Freud's *Besetzung*, appears first as an economic concept to describe the quantity of libidinal energy that might affix to an object (which might in fact be an idea, a person, a thing), rendering it meaningful.¹⁴ Through cathexis, objects are manufactured for and by the psyche. If *contingency* is a blasting apart by touch, *cathexis* is a binding together—of subject and object—by investment. By *binding* I do not mean to imply coming coherence but rather the paradox of being undone at the limits of the self. Cathexis, for this book, is the force of attachment that blurs the subject-object divide precisely at the site of that object's making. In this way, the name East Bengal is the name of an apparitional *desh*, whose sensuous self-appearance in material forms (and material itself) reveals the labor and artifice of nation-making. It also carries within its form that originary Bengal, which prior to 1947 was called in Bangla (the language, as distinct from the ethnolinguistic identarian category "Bengali") *Bangla-Desh*.

Desh, which in Bangla connotes home, country, and locality, indexes a range of affective and material attachments and commitments that exceed and predate the postcolonial state.¹⁵ It is, vernacularly, the sign of the local. This is to say, although it adheres to a nationalist imagination and to the very name of the nation, it will consistently, throughout this book, signal the aliveness of local cathexis and affiliation. East Bengal (or, as it is called in Bangla, *Purba Banga*) etymologically and ideologically stands for the originary Bengal, that from which all other imaginations of *desh* arise. Meaning both "East" and "ancestral," *purba* aligns with kinship (*purba-purush*: ancestral men/forebears) and space (*purbadesh*: ancestral home) such that there is an affective tropism toward the East. Bengalis, in whatever scope of diaspora, introduce themselves by their *desh*, rural ancestral territory which they may never have seen but evoke as intimately as affiliative genealogy. When Hindus left ancestral homes in East Bengal during the various upheavals following the 1905 partition (and continuing to the present) to migrate within Bengal, though across a geopolitical boundary, many would eat soil before their departure. Taking into their bodies the land from which they were removed, they would carry the essence of *desh* within them. The deeply local character of *desh*, unbound by the phenomenological limits of the nation-state, is in this way both profuse and diffuse. Thus, this examination of East Bengal unpins itself from the space-time demands of the "state" as an ideological concept and as a phenomenological reality.

Confounding imperial and postcolonial attempts to produce the nation-state as a compelling singular object of political cathexis, a powerfully felt transhistorical transnationalism persists between Bangladesh, its erstwhile neighbor West Bengal, and its historical prepartitioned state. Despite the 1947 partition of British India, in which Bengal was once again cleaved into East and West—West Bengal becoming a part of India and East Bengal incorporated into Pakistan, whose other wing lay some 1,300 miles away—Bengal had been and would continue to be marked by moments of upheaval during which the geopolitical border between East and West would prove to be as porous as the idea of postcolonial sovereignty itself. This was perhaps never more true than in 1971 when, during Bangladesh's war for independence from Pakistan, tens of millions of Bangladeshi refugees flooded across the border into India, drawn not just by spatial proximity but also by a shared linguistic and cultural life that had not died with the creation of two new nation-states a quarter century earlier.

Derrida writes of the apparition that “[w]hen the ghostly body (*die gespenstige Leibhaftigkeit*) of the emperor disappears, it is not the body that disappears, merely its phenomenality, its phantomality (*Gespensterhaftigkeit*). The emperor is then more real than ever and one can measure better than ever his actual power.”¹⁶ With the loss of the phenomenological nation, the potency of its sway and the relations of its manufacture come into focus. East Bengal's apparitional form opens up a new archive that is fundamentally rooted in the concept and matter of *desh* and yet, in its local character, reveals the fugitive range that exceeds its location.

Thus, the first three chapters engage figures, historical moments, and texts central to the postcolonial canon; their familiar appearance takes on a new shape in the context of East Bengal. In turn, the latter chapters trace the path from the 1971 independence of Bangladesh to demonstrate the recursive continuity between this nation-state and its prior incarnations, which are never lost, do not disappear, and are never completely disavowed. East Bengal produces a powerful form of public feeling that operates across the sociopolitical, material, and ideational order. Its symbolic and sentimental force refuses to be mapped onto geopolitical borders and their historiography, compelling us to ask: Where does a nation that never was exist? This question is taken literally in what follows.

I posit East Bengal with full awareness that I may be accused of prioritizing cultural referents and terms that are now coded “Hindu.” Indeed, in the current frigid geopolitical climate between India and Bangladesh, it may seem perversely asynchronic to turn attention to their repudiated contiguity. But it is precisely this shared disavowal, which points to the incomplete recalibration of affiliations that come with the production of independent statehood, that

suggests a productive unsettlement. Tracing figures and terms that traverse the time and space of state-making clears a path through the fantasized rigidity of borders. Rabindranath Tagore, who won a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, penned the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh. Though nominally both “Indian” and “Hindu” (the contestedness of these terms for Tagore will become clear in chapter 2 amid his debate with Gandhi over anticolonial imaginations), Tagore remains richly cathected to in the Bangladeshi national imagination. *Mukti Bahini*, Bengali guerilla forces who fought the Pakistani army in 1971, announced themselves by whistling his songs, which became the shibboleth of a nationalist loyalty. Even as relations between independent Bangladesh and India have soured in the subsequent decades with the rise of Wahhabi influence in Bangladesh and anti-Muslim Hindu nationalism in India, the relationship between East and West Bengal, like that between politics and feeling, remains co-constitutive and contingent.

Desh in the truest sense of the word, the Bengal that persists between and within the boundaries of two nation-states, offers a fresh account of their becoming in a markedly local tenor. For this reason, *An Empire of Touch* is organized around possibilities that emerged following three moments of political upheaval in Bengal: the 1905 partition of the state, the 1930 outbreak of anticolonial violence, and the 1971 Bangladesh war for independence. This historical arc is not pinned to the dominant narrative of the subcontinent, in which 1947 serves as the nation- and meaning-making event. Although the catastrophic violence of the partitioning of India and Pakistan, as historical caesura, exerts a powerful magnetic force on political and affective narratives, in arguing that 1947 is not the defining event for East Bengal, this book reorients the postcolonial history of the subcontinent. It ruptures the myth in which a singular political event suddenly instantiated the nation and displaces the singular force of a political future drawn out of Hindu nationalist roots.

As a result, I do not claim to offer a seamless historical narrative of the rise of nationalism in Bengal. Nor do I suggest individual moments as hermetic case studies. Rather, the structure of the book follows from its premise that in eruptive political and historical moments, affiliations and investments come into being: forms of libidinal upsurge in which not all cathexes will prevail but out of which radical possibilities appear in moments of what Émile Durkheim has called “collective effervescence.”¹⁷ These moments, which I describe throughout the book as “anti-originary,” refuse progressive teleology: they start, stutter, skip, get caught in the groove of the historical record. By calling them anti-originary, I am resisting the romance of nostalgic resignification and the dismay of traumatic repudiation. Implicit here is the conviction that, even as these forms of attachment do not take on institutional lives, they do not die away.

Their appearance as interruptions, excesses, and incoherences illuminates an alternate vision and lived possibility of what constitutes the political.

In this regard, this book is utopian. It sees desire as political and feminine labor as imagining collective life and commitment otherwise. Whereas postcolonial political modernity based on the model of liberalism vaunts rationality as a marker of a fit political subject, this book is interested in what is extruded in the making of this subject, what cannot be compelled into its shape, and what kinds of psychic and material touch come to constitute its politics. As a result, *An Empire of Touch* is shot through with figures, objects, and ideals that collide with one another; *contingency* is a word we might use for beacons to recognize shared political feeling across historical time.

Contingency, from the Latin *contingere* (*con*—together, *tangere*—to touch), is another name for the encounter of shared space, time, and recurrence that asks us to read for articulation in the fragment, presence in the trace. The gathering point of contact, contingency testifies to the power of affiliations and desires that do not map onto the individual, sovereign subject, the liberal political project, or the postcolonial nation-state. Historical contingency, what Walter Benjamin calls the past as it “flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again,” breaks open progressive historicism’s parable of wholeness and development that has consigned East Bengal and its representative feminine subjects to the waiting room of late capital.¹⁸ Freeing us from the overdetermination of postcolonial failure, contingency makes way for what Eve Sedgwick calls a reparative reading practice, one oriented toward *touch* as accretion, accumulation, and resolvedly still, interruption.¹⁹ For this book, it is an ethical orientation as much as a theoretical one.

What the Archive May Hold

Following the 1857 Mutiny and the establishment of formal British rule in India, the Raj turned to institutions and technologies that leaned heavily on emergent epistemologies of individuality, interiority, and development to construct colonial subjects as objects of governance. Imperial strategies of governance and anticolonial discourses of nationalism joined in this period to produce a common discourse of self-determination that promised the sovereignty and intelligibility of an individual and national subject. Bengal, with the imperial capital of Calcutta and the agricultural abundance of the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta, was a laboratory for these sciences of subjectivity. Colonial knowledge systems to which we will turn—from political philosophy

to psychoanalysis and fingerprinting, from jurisprudence to demography and development economics—show Bengal’s significance as a rich object of inquiry and site of intervention for the systemization of knowledge and influence by colonial administration and global governance alike. Out of these epistemological structures, the contours of both a discernible collective (the prototype for some aspect of the national imagination) and individual subject came into form. Here, we can see the legacy of John Stuart Mill’s contention that the social collective is but a dilation of the character of the individual.²⁰ In the frame of law, this individual was constructed as approaching, while never fully inhabiting legal and political equivalence with, his British counterpart: nearly rational, nearly self-interested, nearly autonomous, nearly masculine.

More starkly still, the colonial production of political subjecthood was conditioned by the production of sexual difference: the convergence of institutions of imperial governance and nationalist iconography of Bengal as pervasively feminine and spectacularly maternal. The romanticized image of the Bengali woman as mother/land/goddess became a political force in response to the discursive power of the national ideal. By the same stroke, masculinity was produced as an affective and performative supplement.²¹ We will see, particularly in the first three chapters, how this antinomy played out across not just ideological spaces but geopolitical ones as well. For example, as discussed in chapter 3, Bimala, the main character of Tagore’s novel *The Home and the World*, is commonly read as a site of seemingly excessive national and erotic attachment who illuminates the limits of a political order rooted in rationalism rather than feeling. But, in fact, Bimala refuses the distance of resemblance offered by metaphor and instead articulates an embodied, totalizing self-identification with rural East Bengal. When chapter 4 turns to women raped during the 1971 partition—designated *birangonas* (war heroines) by the state and offered compensation for their war “labor”—a new vision of the politics of representability comes to light. Following the 1905 partition of the region, which ignited vigorous nationalist movements both within and without Bengal, East Bengal came to be figured as feminine and poetic whereas West Bengal came to be masculine and political. Central anticolonial and postcolonial projects of individual and national sovereignty were, in this way, practices of gendering and of delineating political and material labors.

As a historical referent, the pre-1947 form of the colonial state of Bengal was an administratively bound category that, following 1905 and the subsequent reunification of the Bengal Presidency in 1911, included not just the two Bangla-speaking regional lobes of East and West (*Purba Banga* and *Paschim Banga*, respectively) but also the provinces of Bihar, Orissa, and Assam. The name “Bengal” telescopes to index the ideal of Calcutta as an erstwhile center of colonial governance and as a nexus of nationalist foment. In this way, a layered

synecdoche emerges in which Calcutta—urban, majority Hindu, with a significant English-speaking bureaucratic *bhadralok* or “gentleman” class—stands in for the whole of India. In turn, India—partly by virtue of the post-1965 intellectual diaspora, which populated literature and history departments with the early generation of postcolonial scholars, many of them of precisely that class from Calcutta—stands in for the whole of the colonized world. Indeed, the myopia of *desh* so conceived is one way to understand the critique of Subaltern Studies for seemingly ignoring the question of Islam, while focusing so studiously on Bengal where half of its inhabitants are in fact Muslim. For this reason, my reading of East Bengal revises the narrative of political modernity offered by postcolonial studies, which has historically focused on West Bengal as a ur-representation of British empire and anticolonialism. Claims of Bengal’s scholarly desiccation miss the originary conflation of the two Bengals.²² That Bengal of postcolonial studies fame is not one.

In 1905, given that the province’s population was greater than that of any other province in colonial India, the presidency of Bengal was an unruly charge for colonial administration.²³ Moreover, it was the site of growing protest among the *bhadralok* class, whose socioeconomic participation in the colonial apparatus was particularly significant, as Bengal was the seat of the Raj’s administration. Seeking to disaggregate the urban elite of Calcutta from the ancestral *zamindaris* or estates from which they drew much of their income and status, the partition line drawn by Lord Curzon’s government bisected Bengal on the basis of religious difference; the region designated East Bengal had a majority Muslim population, while West Bengal was predominately Hindu. Bengal meted out its communal population in a particular, and historically contingent, manner: along the very axis of rural dependence and urban development. The bifurcation of Bengal produced, on the one hand, vigorous anticolonial protest, largely by Hindu *bhadralok* in East Bengal for whom the partition meant becoming both a political and demographic minority; and, on the other hand, an emergent sense among East Bengali Muslims of political and economic possibility.

David Ludden suggests that the partition of Bengal followed the vectors of capital—limiting as much as possible the bifurcation of *zamindari* estates—in the bureaucratic reorganization of a deeply cherished ideological space.²⁴ For the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, and his compatriots, it created a coherent space bound by the Meghna-Brahmaputra Basin as East Bengal streamlined its river, natural resource, and railway administration, as well as offered the not insignificant benefit of dividing Muslim voices and political demands from the growing cacophony of the anticolonial Congress Party. For West Bengali political thinkers, many of whom derived wealth either individually or culturally from *zamindaris* contained by the river basin, the supply line between

the promise of progress and modernity and the nourishment offered by its antecedents was cut. What resulted was the division of longstanding forms of manufacture, production, and consumption between the now-marked Muslim East by the Hindu West, even after the partition was reversed in 1911. Turning to work, bodies, and articulations that have been, by virtue of their feminization, depoliticized and objectified, we see the gendered manufacture of postcolonial political possibility.

Who is the subject of this possibility? It is now, thanks to the work of critical race, queer, and feminist studies, a critical convention to acknowledge that the model of the liberal subject is ill-fitted to many, if not most, of the conceptions of political life and thought.²⁵ In the postcolonial case, a curious contradiction emerges at the limits of this subject fantasy: articulations that refuse the sovereign individual as locus or telos appear within the context of a struggle for state sovereignty. They are, for this reason, often recoded or elided. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, write that within Euro-American cultures (though unmarked), to encounter nonsovereignty “is to encounter relationality itself, in the psychic, social, and political senses of the term.”²⁶ This nonsovereignty is the negation of containment and rationality. But for the subjects I engage in this book—Bengali women under empire—the fantasy of sovereignty has always been unsettled and unsettling. I turn to the language of the nonsovereign mindful of the tenuous claims to sovereign subjecthood which have been the grounds of anticolonial protest and of how women of the Global South have been figured as the limit (if not failure) of liberal, sovereign subjecthood. Perhaps more than any other critical term in this book, it may prove to be inadequate. However, I begin with it out of a fidelity to the language of politics to which women themselves turn: that which emerges from the social text of their own lives.

Swadeshi, the anticolonial program of economic self-sufficiency meaning “country of one’s own” that came to prominence in Bengal after the 1905 partition; *swaraj*, the term popularized by Gandhi as the demand for “self-rule”; and *swadhinata*, the word in Bangla and Hindi semantically coded as “independence” but more precisely translated as “self-dependence,” unite under the shared reflexive Sanskrit pronoun for the self, *swa/sva*. But this self, to which each of these terms and their confederates refer, is not the self of liberal self-determination, not the atomistic, autonomous self of possessive individualism that undergirds Enlightenment thought. This self is in relation to a greater Self. Bengali nationalist leader Bipin Chandra Pal objected, on these grounds, to Gandhi’s use of *swaraj* to describe a negative freedom in the guise of liberal political thought.²⁷ He writes that *swaraj* is in fact “when the individual self stands in conscious union with the Universal or the Supreme Self. When the Self sees and

knows whatever is as its own self, it attains swaraj. . . . The self in Hindu thought, even in the individual, is a synonym for the Universal.”²⁸ Though Pal identifies this self as a character of Hindu thought, the sociolinguistic life of the Sanskritic prefix abides no communal boundary on the subcontinent, and this is the discursive matrix within which a variety of nationalist projects—Hindu, Muslim, and secular alike—operate. The individual as political actor is not the same as the individual as political subject; *sva* carries in it an articulation of the self as subject that is always leaning toward another who is not separate, the continual becoming of a capacious, nonsovereign self. This is the binding work of being undone—not the ecstatic *jouissance* of self-shatter but an undoing that is constitutive of the political subject: an always relational self, an always, then, political self in negotiation with instruments and institutions of power.

To encounter postcolonial nonsovereignty, we can say in echo-distortion of Berlant and Edelman, is thus to encounter a foundational relationality that dynamically shapes the psychic, social, and political registers of life. It offers a way to see the accumulative, communitarian possibilities that appear under the sign of failed individualism. In the case of East Bengal, it further enables us to see why and in what ways this historical place remains such a satisfying and magnetic object of cathexis, of nonsovereign affiliation and binding—the site of a distinctly uncosmopolitan transnationalism.

This book reads material objects—fabric, texts, archives, art—as gathering sites of political articulation and investment. *Articulation* here signifies both the utterance and, to follow Bruno Latour, the orientation of “being affected by differences.”²⁹ It is not a vitalist conception of labor because *things* in this book are neither inert objects nor the object of inquiry themselves: this is a book about the relation between intimate, tactile things and porous, political bodies.³⁰ A commitment to postcolonial studies and to feminist theory, and to the legacies of imperial knowledge and subject production, means that this book places the human and her lived life of possibility at the fore of its study. *An Empire of Touch* shows how she has never been outside of the world of politics, but through her labor and its touch, offers this world radical possibilities and fabricates them into being. Articulation, for our purposes, restores to affect its sensual and relational quality.

Articulation as the power to affect and be affected shows that the intimate contact of labor makes way for a politics and ethics of accumulation and permeability. Returning to Baruch Spinoza’s (by way of Gilles Deleuze) notion of the body’s “power to affect and be affected,” I take affect to be a capacity and phenomenon that stages the ethical encounter of touch.³¹ This is a form of Ranjana Khanna’s understanding of affect as “a surplus that questions its boundaries, and a surplus that may manifest itself in affectlessness, it is the porous interface of the skin that marks a relation to alterity.”³² Take, for example, the tradition

of *kantha* stitch quilts that appears in chapter 5. Originally objects of a deeply domestic and familial practice, made by the compression of old cotton *saris* and cloth and sewn using thread pulled from *sari* borders, *kanthas* are a form of self-expression for women—in the imagery and design as well as in the corporeal imprint left by their making—not oriented toward the market. Today, however, *kanthas* circulate globally in the fair-trade economy as symbols of women’s empowerment through handicraft production. Their new material life, now rotely reproduced on single-layer new cloth to be sold in bulk to commercial merchants in Europe and America as well as to a globalized subcontinental elite, is one which, even as the *personal-ity* of the object disappears, retains the somatic promise of touch, of contact in a newly dispersed economy.

Turning to objects alone, particularly domestic and feminized ones, cannot account for or hope to understand the lives of political labor. The problem of women, for the Subaltern Studies Collective, has been—perhaps more acutely than for any of their other inquiries—the problem of the archive. Partha Chatterjee argues that evidence of women’s political commitments is not housed in the colonial archive; instead, “[t]he domain where the new idea of womanhood was sought to be actualized was the home, and the real history of that change can be constructed only out of evidence left behind in autobiographies, family histories, religious tracts, literature, theatre, songs, paintings, and other such cultural artefacts that depict life in middle-class homes.”³³ The colonial archive, for Chatterjee, already under pressure to produce evidence of ‘subaltern consciousness,’ offers only historical hints of women’s participation in nationalist politics. More broadly, this problem of the archive—of the material objects by which we conceive a political subject and a political history—is a problem of our conception of the political.

Culture becomes the unreliable boundary of political possibility in a myth now decisively debunked by feminist historians who have produced a rich counternarrative to this claim of the archive’s failure, the limited sphere of women’s political life, and the material objects of that history.³⁴ To ask after the form and feature of women’s political life in India is now to be afforded a range of primary and secondary material that evinces the dense diversity of this labor. At the same time, this form of historicist rejoinder has been subject to its own critique. Spivak, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and in her introduction to the *Selected Subaltern Studies* collection, warns against what she sees as the fantasy of her Subaltern Studies colleagues and other historians: that they can locate evidence of subaltern politics, that agency is an identifiable structure, that the subject of subaltern politics is the individual. It is a feminist deconstructive reminder of the political and psychic projections by which the category of the subaltern is produced; it is the ethical injunction to consider the power of representation.³⁵

By neither eschewing the archive's limited vision nor reifying its material form, I have endeavored to follow Spivak's enjoinder to its epistemological limit.

This project, like many others of postcolonial studies, began in the colonial archive. It began at the British Library and National Archives of India, looking for documents about women's participation in anticolonial nationalism. The first chapter of this book in particular owes itself to those archives. Far from being obscured within the colonial and national archives, Pritilata Waddedar's trace is profuse and diffuse, demanding a form of reading for her articulation and the terms by which she comes to be commemorated and historicized that resists hermeneutic mastery and embraces intimate contact. The pressure upon the archive becomes starkest in chapter 4, where the Bangladeshi National Archives incinerate records of women who, having been raped during the 1971 war, will come to be called *war heroines* by the government. Recordkeeping rather than archiving, this postcolonial nation-state orients its historicist practices toward a global aid apparatus which, as we will see in chapter 5, quantifies the quality of life as a measure of postcolonial progress. Neither record nor archive seem able to contain the question at the core of our inquiry: How do postcolonial women, whose labor is the fulcrum of state-making—that well-trod ground of the recognizably political—articulate the terms of their own relational, aspirational commitments?

Within and in between moments of archival buckling, I have turned to a curated archive of objects, texts, and ephemera to locate the insistent mark of women's investment and political commitment in the supplementary movement of texts and textiles. They are bound to one another by a shared confluence of space and possibility, what I call here *contingency*.

Death of a Discipline Foretold

The permeability of touch is not limited to the subjects of this book. In the writing of it, I have endeavored to produce intimacy as scholarly practice. In the latter chapters where my material has come directly from living people—those who volunteered in rehabilitation efforts following Bangladesh's independence, artisanal textile producers, garment workers—the *feeling* of connection and embeddedness became more profound and more ethically vexing. But even in the earlier chapters, those which are “historical,” the question of my own limits as a scholar in the encounter with these objects and speaking-subjects has been central. Where do my position in the American academy, my political commitments, the clothes on my own body end and the material of my study begin?

That question has rather insistently refused resolution. In a book about the possibility of a politics of being undone, I have aimed to be open to being worked upon and dissembled—a form of what Spivak has termed “critical intimacy.”³⁶ This is, in part, a matter of scale. Critical intimacy attempts to draw objects near, to engage the local, to be touched. Turning to the local and the intimate, *An Empire of Touch* parses the global life of empire.

Recent disciplinary trends toward the global Anglophonic and planetary, repudiating the postcolonial for what might be seen as its embarrassing overpoliticization, have followed what Terry Eagleton diagnoses as the shift from nation and class to ethnicity, which is “also one from politics to culture.”³⁷ The field, as such, has gone even further, leaning away from cultural critique toward the postcritical and descriptive turns in literary studies more broadly. This has meant a renewed romance with the literary, in which the politics of critique align with the national and the aesthetics of culture align with the cosmopolitan. Although the admonition of postcritical thinkers that the fascination with hermeneutics of suspicion has limited and perhaps even mutated the mandate of literary studies is a salutary intervention to the self-consuming practice of overreading, the disavowal of the political in what used to be called postcolonial studies would seem to throw the critical baby out with the provincial bathwater.³⁸

It has become commonplace to proclaim the end of postcolonial studies while simultaneously lamenting its unrealized potential as an inquiry into relations of power. However, in this historical moment, at which neoliberalism’s new market convenes alongside growing militant ethnonationalisms across the world, we need more than ever the category of the postcolonial, as a humanistic formation that indicates the shared work of description and critique to understand the interdependence between aesthetics and politics. This is far from an obsolete or extravagant hermeneutic forty years on, when *homo economicus* governs the value of the humanities and its mandate in the university. Against the artful depoliticization of the global, this book is committed to the work of the postcolonial—as a concept and as a hermeneutic—and its politics in the faith that it is possible to be critical, to prioritize the political, while still making room for the textured richness of wonder and rupturous surprise.

This book’s account of intimate tactile labor connects flows of contemporary global capital to the material life of politics, demonstrating the corporeal, epistemological, and ideological interconnections wrought by empire and its afterlives. Material intimacies made possible by textiles reorient the critical trajectory by which the figure of the Global Southern woman can be seen as available for rescue or intervention. As we will see in the final chapter, the moniker “ready-made garments” is a grotesque misnomer for an industry deeply exertive and physical. The sleight of hand by which the body of the (young, female)

garment worker is disappeared in the market form does not expunge the particulate signature of the object. One “piece” will often come into contact with several dozen bodies over the course of its making—hands, fingers, tongues, lips, teeth, sweat, blood, spit—and it is the nature of cotton, of this organic fiber, to take into itself those leavings and incorporate them just as it will incorporate the bodily traces of its wearer. It is this accumulative contact, this shared body captured within material, that is at the center of this book’s story about the labor of women and what we call the political. This is a call for a dilated phenomenology, one in which the trace of touch, borne in the structure of text and textile, abides even and especially in the instance of its apparent effacement. In warp and woof, in captured dust of human remains, cloth gathers global interconnection: not simply the empire of capital, but an empire of touch. Accumulation and contact are the bases of political possibility in which the postcolonial endeavors of individual and national sovereignty are reimagined. In this light, we can see the material coincidence of 2013 with which we began as a battle over what will come to represent Bangladesh in a global market and a postcolonial imagination. Will it be muslin’s valorized artisanal labor marked masculine (though always bearing the traces of women’s bodies) or the mundane industrial labor of young women?

Although textiles of East Bengal are a particularly resonant and collocated site from which to consider the kinds of political subject life and imaginative worlds opened up through a capacious understanding of touch—its material, corporeal, psychic, and aesthetic dimensions—this book engages a variety of other material encounters to think differently about contact, about historicism, and about technologies of representation. An empire of touch is fabricated with the disciplining contact of governmental surveillance and containment; the purifying contact between individual hands and woven thread, drawing together a common nation bound by its fabric; the absorbing identification with an ideal which transforms the capacity of the body and the sense of the self; the contamination of violence figured as foreign touch that is cleared away by state veneration; the global circulation of intimate objects imbued with the particulate remains of labor.

Given its porosity, cloth retains and absorbs traces of its encounter with the bodies of those who manufacture and use it, militating against the illusion of corporeal or psychic autonomy as it mimics the skin on which it rests; so too, all of the objects of inquiry in this book persistently undo the fantasy of possessive individualism that governed imperial rule and continues to haunt the postcolonial project. I am, in the end, committed to a redemptive quality of text and textile so conceived—not in the terms of access and agency promoted by liberal feminism or fair-trade marketing but as an ethical injunction to read

for accumulation and trace of a more intimate nature, to conceive of labor and touch not as being freed into individuated *homo economicus* but set open into relational world-making. Through this local, material history of women's labor in East Bengal over more than a century, *An Empire of Touch* insists that women articulate in their own idiom political desires and commitment; they speak for themselves what constitutes a good life and shared being in the world.