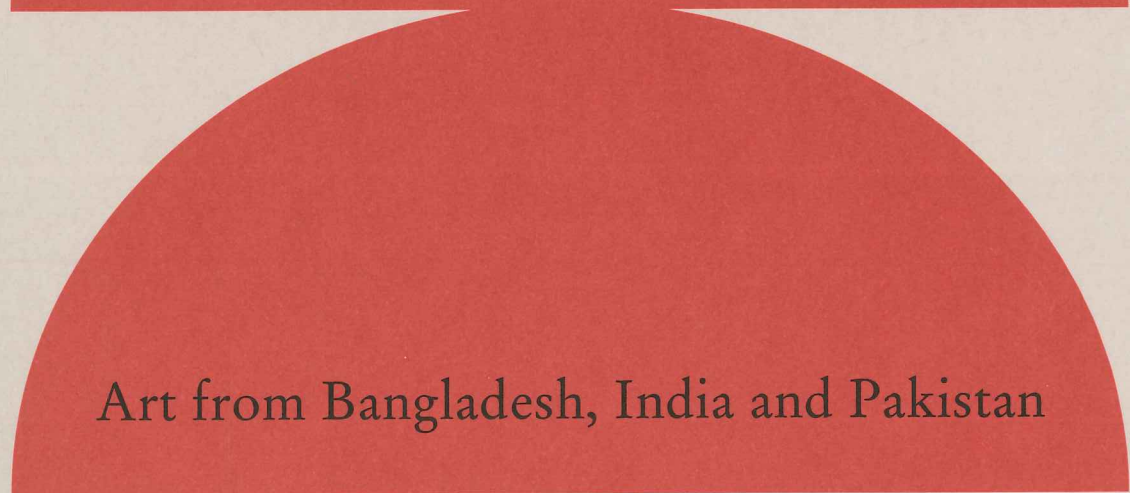
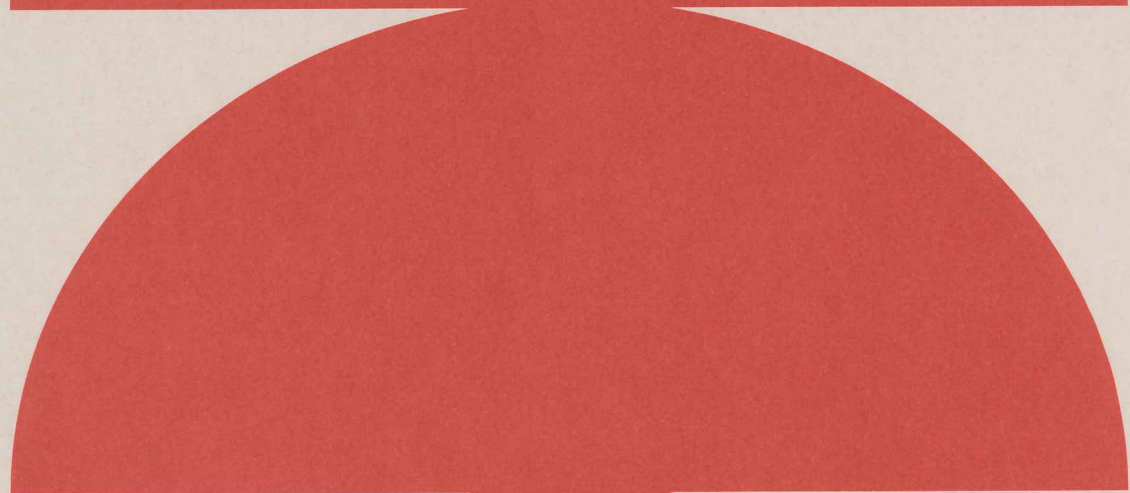
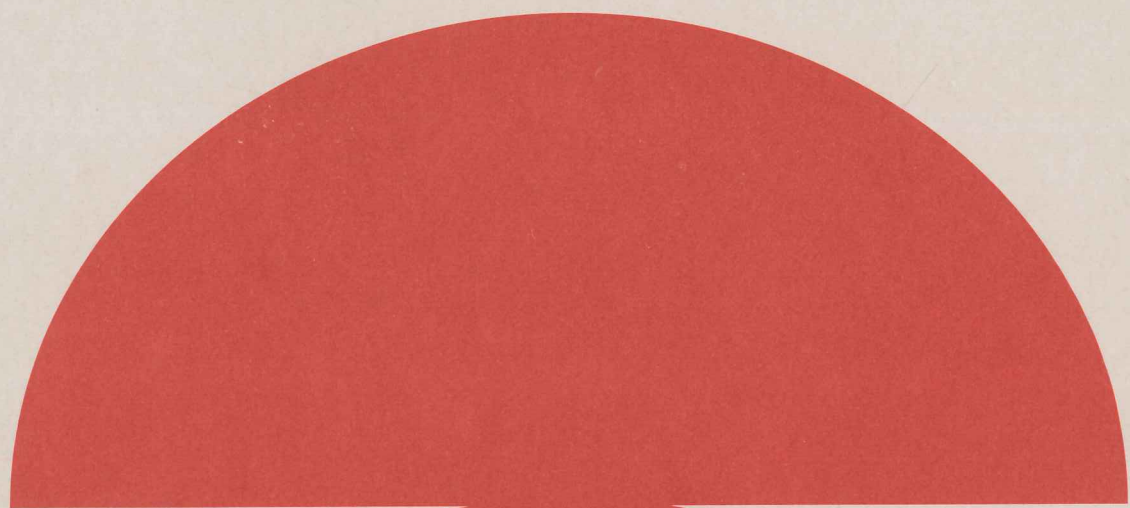


HOMELANDS



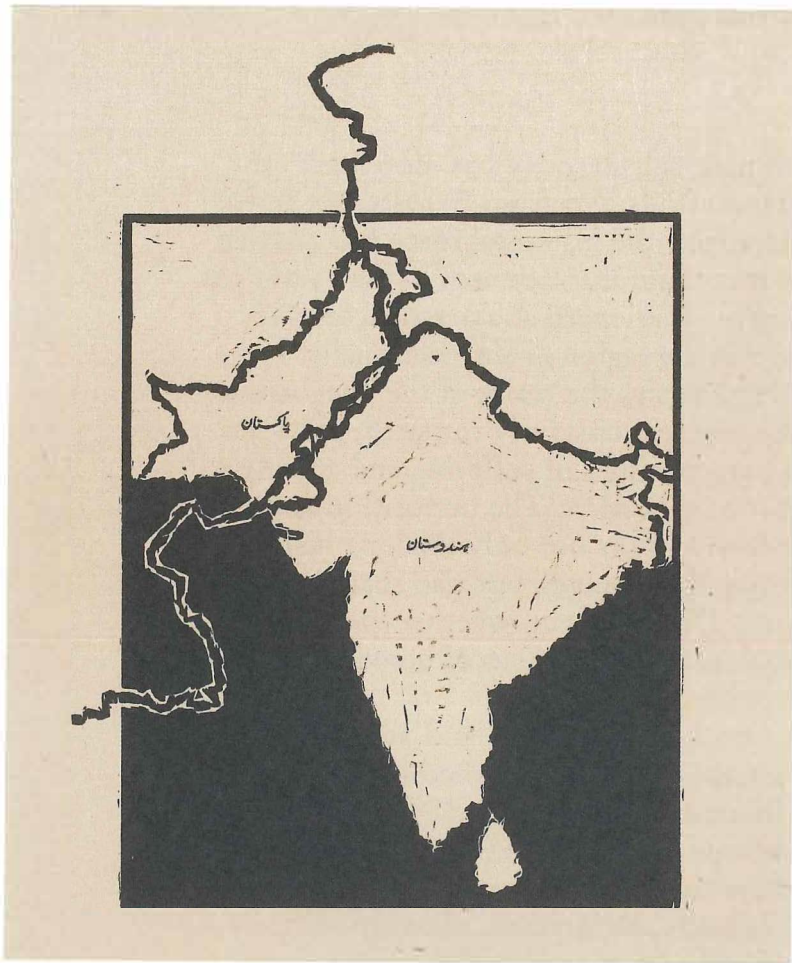
Art from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan

Homelands: An Introduction
Devika Singh

The fierce climate of nationalism today has motivated the artists featured in 'Homelands: Art from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan' to interrogate the historical force and contemporary relevance of home and displacement in their different manifestations, whether experienced at a personal level in South Asia, by others in the region or internationally. The notion of homeland belongs to the realm of the imagination and to seemingly distant, yet constantly revisited, pasts. It also belongs to our present times of suffering and anxiety often spawned by national borders. The imposition and safeguarding of borders disrupts not only the long histories of human movements and exchanges, but also shared pasts, languages and cultures. Displacement, whether forced exile or voluntary expatriation, and the notions of home and nation, therefore appear intrinsically connected.

In 'Reflections on Exile', Edward Said acknowledges exile as a subjective state that has nourished much of twentieth-century literature in Europe and North America. Yet he warns that it cannot be separated from the suffering and mutilation of masses of people, accounted for in seemingly abstract politics. Ironically, he stressed, dislocation has also created acute forms of nationalist ideologies among exiled groups, of which South Asia is an illustration.¹ Nor can it be separated from the many displaced individuals who lost their creative and imaginative force in the process of relocation.

'Homelands' explores the instability of home and nationality through the perspective of artists whose region has been marked by the legacy of Partition in 1947 and the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971, as well as by contemporary migration. The decade that culminated in the independence of India and Pakistan from colonial rule is indelibly linked to resettlement and mass violence. It was marked by world war, famines, peasant uprisings, in addition to Partition, which split the regions of Punjab and Bengal along the so-called Radcliffe Line, and associated inter-religious killings. The Bengal famine is believed to have led to the direct and indirect death of about 3 million people, while Partition uprooted around



Zarina *Atlas of My World IV*, from the portfolio 'Atlas of My World', 2001

12 million people and resulted in the death of several hundreds of thousands across India, East Pakistan and West Pakistan. Less than three decades later, the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan entailed the death of millions between March and December 1971, when Pakistani forces, following India's military intervention, finally surrendered.² At the same time, the war displaced around 9.5 million Bangladeshi who sought refuge in India, creating a crisis in Bengal unseen since Partition.³ Violence and dislocation are thus constitutive experiences of modern South Asia.

Bangladesh counts several monuments to its independence struggle.⁴ For long there was, however, little public debate in the broader region on the suffering undergone at Partition and

few public monuments dedicated to its victims. The only official Indian monument, according to Yasmin Khan, stands in Chandigarh.⁵ Even at the time of the tenth anniversary of Independence, it was the forging of a nationalist genealogy of colonial emancipation—arguably dating back to the mutiny of 1857, rather than the all too present memory of Partition—that fuelled public debates in India and Pakistan.⁶ It is only more recently that the memory of Partition has started to be historicised and debated, though artists such as Zarina, who witnessed Partition firsthand, have long used it as a cornerstone in their art.

More than seventy years on for contemporary youth in South Asia—especially for those whose families were not directly affected—Partition has, however, become an abstraction. Its memory has been superseded by the urge to tackle the pressing needs of everyday life in a context of rapid, largely uncontrolled urbanisation, vast demographic pressures, economic globalisation and social inequality, as well as today's climate emergency. Moreover, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have fallen prey to majoritarian politics. Ongoing and often aggressive border disputes and political tensions have served as alibis for communal politics. In multireligious, Hindu-dominated India, discrimination against Muslims as well as Dalits is rampant, while in Sunni Muslim-majority Pakistan and Bangladesh, indigenous and religious minorities are being persecuted.

In response, the tone used by artists exhibited in 'Homelands' does not mimic the stridency of state politics. Nor does it come with the requisite vehemence of activism. The distance that art affords, both in time and space, has enabled them to deploy tactical procedures and strategies that are carefully calibrated. Their works rely on an acute sense of observation or the double vision of humour, and often demand immersion, dedication and meticulous execution. The result is a scalar shift that answers to the gravity of the subject with poise and poignancy.

I At Home in the World

Of a series of photographs taken along the Mississippi river, artist Sohrab Hura states, 'I [...] wonder how all the long

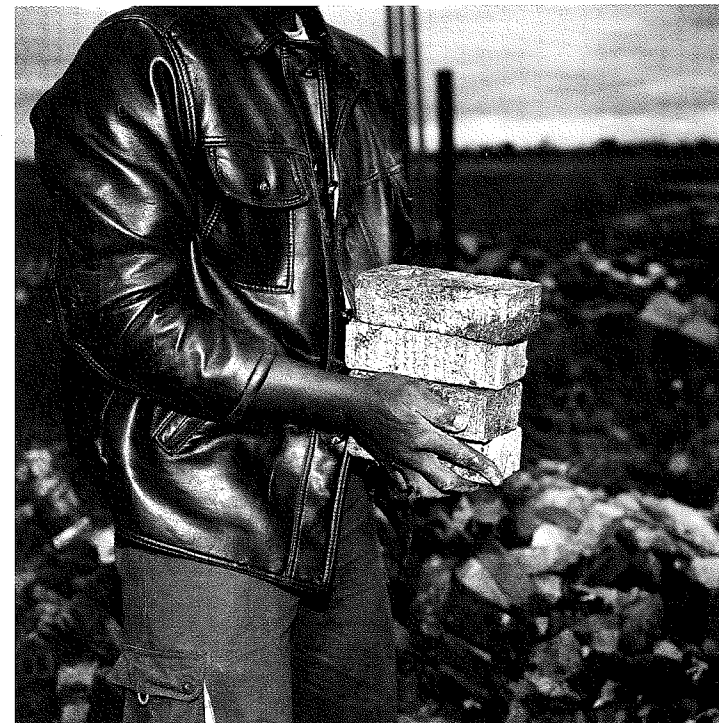
drawn historical scholarship and exposure around American photography has affected my sense of familiarity to it as an outsider'.⁷ This double bind, that of being familiar as an outsider, recalls the relationship of intimate alterity that Dipesh Chakrabarty analyses in his book *Provincializing Europe*:

Can thought transcend places of their origin? Or do places leave their imprint on thought in such a way as to call into question the idea of purely abstract categories? My starting point in all this questioning [...] was the silent and everyday presence of European thought in Indian life and practices. The Enlightenment was part of my sentiments. Only I did not know it as such. Marx was a household Bengali name [...] This recognition of a deep –and often unknown– debt to European thought was my point of departure; without that there could be no 'provincializing Europe'.⁸

The relationship with the West that Chakrabarty describes is both connected as well as unequal.

Many artists from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan have, since independence, questioned the notion of authenticity, whether it be associated with the nation building narratives of their countries or with present-day forms of narrow-minded, exclusionary nationalisms. This is not because of their uprootedness, but in many cases very much because of their investment in, and complex understanding of, locality. From this observation stems the exhibition's commitment to acknowledge artists' piercing insights into their own societies, as well as the unique points of view individual artists can offer on others, if only from an outside perspective, be these geographically proximate or distant.

It is telling that in her essay in this volume, Nancy Adajania quotes Salman Rushdie on the effects of migration. Throughout his life he never seemed to belong, whether as an Indian Muslim in Bombay, a Mohajir in Pakistan, a 'British Asian', as he self-described, or an author in hiding for many years.⁹ He has himself written on the suspicion elicited by cultural hybridity and the plural viewpoints it helps generate. A similar state of un-homeliness is one that the exhibited artists interrogate and use as a vantage point. In all cases, their work is deeply invested in the art and politics of the region, which



Sohrab Hura Brick Scavenger, Mississippi, USA, from *The Levee*, 2016
Sohrab Hura Bird House, Louisiana, USA, from *The Levee*, 2016

several throw into sharp relief. Yet as citizens of different countries, outside and across South Asia—and as many have lived in several places across the world—they approach these politics from different perspectives.

The real and the imagined movement of the mind—that has the capacity to bridge different locales—is something Nikhil Chopra directly addresses. In 'Homelands', by juxtaposing photographs of a performance in Bombay with drawings executed in Havana, Chopra plays with the sense of dislocation that this conjunction produces (pl. 4–10). He invites a comparison between the two port cities, their long-closed economies and what used to be the time warp effect of their material cultures—on which Homi K. Bhabha has also perceptively remarked.¹⁰ While the social and political contexts of India and Cuba are profoundly different, Chopra's works interrogate the different environments that the artist-performer takes hold of, the mobility that artists rely on for their work, and the possible deprivation of that mobility.

II Nationalism

The aggressive assertion of nationalism has led many in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan to live in a state of precarity. The Muslim-majority region of Kashmir has been disputed by India and Pakistan since 1947, after the Maharaja of Kashmir eventually acceded to India. Soon enough the two countries went to war over Kashmir-related tensions, then again in 1965 and briefly in 1999. India has accused Pakistan of infiltrating jihadis and stirring unrest in the region since the late 1980s. Once a tourist destination for its stunning landscapes and natural beauty, India's Kashmir has transformed into a heavily militarised region. Begun in 2014, Sohrab Hura's ongoing photographic series on Kashmir intimates violence through a visual interplay of unsettling clues: stones running across a road, blood flowing into a river, ripped fish eyes assembled onto a table, a truck stuck in a road fence (pl. 17–20). These elements ricochet across the composition, interspersed with quotidian scenes and moments of intense calm and beauty. At the time of writing in September 2019, Kashmir is under lockdown and undergoing a critical transition following the declaration of the Jammu and Kashmir



Documentation of *Aar Paar*, Karachi, Public Art Project between India and Pakistan, 2002

Reorganisation Act. The situation as it stands between India and Pakistan is extremely tense and divisive.

Artists from India and Pakistan have defied these polarising politics in their work and actively sought to collaborate with one another. Consider Bani Abidi's triptych formed of the videos *Mangoes* (1999), *Anthems* (2000) and *The News* (2001) (pl. 1–3). In these the artist performs simple acts of Indo-Pakistani competition that expose both the countries' divided history and profound similarities. When studied side by side, the composed anchor women of *The News* who relate the same absurd news item, one in Sanskritised Hindi and the other in Arabic inflected Urdu, exude the sound bites of officialdom. This is especially so when one knows how close these languages used to be in their everyday vocabulary.

An example of cross-border collaboration is the *Aar Paar* (literally 'across') artist initiative in Karachi and Mumbai, in which Abidi and Shilpa Gupta participated.¹¹ In July 2002, only shortly after deadly anti-Muslim riots took place in the Indian state of Gujarat, Mumbai-based Gupta sent posters by email to be printed locally in Karachi and inserted in the streets of the city (pl. 14). This critical intervention in the public sphere, and the unease such an intrusion elicited, foregrounds the

transformations of Indian art from the 1990s, with which Gupta has been deeply involved. Communal politics, based on the instrumentalisation of religious belonging, affected Gupta's home city of Bombay with a particular acuity in the 1990s. These included, among others, the anti-Muslim riots of 1993, which followed the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya in 1992.

In the case of Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi, it is the street life of Karachi and the popular and informal urban cultures of South Asia that form one of the hallmarks of their visual lexicon. In *Efflorescence* (pl. 11–13), they use bright neon sculptures to debunk the contradiction of flowers serving, in a benign and banal way, as national symbols. These flowers can also hide deeper wounds. For instance one of the works takes the shape of a water lily, Bangladesh's national flower. A large sculpture of a water lily stands at the centre of Dhaka's Shapla square on the site of a mass grave of the Liberation War, whose conflicted memory remains unresolved. The small, fragile flower, now transformed into a monument, exemplifies the memory of large-scale violence that attended the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, and whose effects continue to shape life in contemporary South Asia.

III Fragments of Exile

The title and diminutive scale of Zarina Hashmi's work *Without Destination* (2016) (pl. 43) indicate the magnitude of the artist's despair. *Without Destination* is a work of extreme reduction. Two brittle white lines, one resembling the record of a heartbeat, run across pieces of black paper assembled to take the shape of a boat. The small, quietly assertive collage holds one's attention. Much of Zarina's work and sensibility originates from the memory of Partition and from her nomadic life. Zarina (who prefers to go by her first name) was born in Aligarh in 1937. She remembers surrounding villages being burnt down at Partition. In the 1950s her family resettled in Pakistan, while Zarina eventually established herself in New York in the early 1970s, after having trained and lived in Bangkok, Paris, Tokyo and New Delhi. While her own experience of expatriation cannot in any way be compared to the migration of refugees, Zarina has often



Branches collected in Mohammadpur by Yasmin Jahan Nupur

reflected on the fates of others. Made in reaction to migrants crossing the Mediterranean, *Without Destination* represents, through passion and solidarity, the artist's expression of civic ideas.

Yasmin Jahan Nupur chose to work in a similarly direct, pared-down register when addressing the impending transformation of her family land into an industrial zone. *Home* (2019) follows the artist walking up a hill and looking down onto an open landscape (pl. 26–28). The filmed performance is dignified and undramatic. Here, displacement alludes to people who are uprooted across only small distances, but are barred access to their land and its evocative power. At the time of her performance, Nupur also collected botanical specimens knowing she may never be able to return again. The samples act as stand-ins for her home and attest to the natural richness of the land that is soon to be destroyed. They bear the same evidentiary status as objects photographed in Munem Wasif's *Spring Song* series (2019) over the course of numerous trips to the Rohingya camps of Teknaf in Cox's

Bazar (pl. 34–39). In this work a panoply of forlorn and makeshift objects—ranging from official deeds to toys, a cell phone and other everyday commodities (Spring Song is the name of a commonly used skin lotion)—invokes a state of limbo and signals the basic and visceral need to construct a home, that is not only the will to survive but also that of creating emotional bonds. Taken together these possessions embody the deprivation of their owners.

The writing of history and the revival of the past in South Asia fuel several of these conflicts. Instrumentalised by nationalist rhetoric, historical interpretations are used to read present-day divisions back into past. In the case of Rohingyas, living in majority Buddhist Myanmar, it is their belonging to the history of Arakan, today's Rakhine state, that is being contested to justify their persecution. Artworks and objects have also been at the centre of claims to the past. Seher Shah's photogravures *Argument from Silence* (2019) (pl. 29–33) focus on dispersed objects that now form the relics of Gandhara. The Gandhara legacy, celebrated by colonial art historians and the subject of much Orientalist lore, sat at the confluence of Greek and Indian civilisations. Disputed between India and Pakistan at Partition, the sculptures and fragments that are featured in *Argument from Silence* are housed in the Le Corbusier-designed Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh; India's utopian city, which was built after Lahore—the former capital of undivided Punjab—went to Pakistan. Inside the museum galleries, the Bodhisattvas become objects of aesthetic contemplation, enhanced by the balanced order of the hermetic compositions achieved through Shah's careful perspectival constructions.

Burma, where Desmond Lazaro's Indian ancestors migrated to in the nineteenth century, is also a lost homeland of the artist's family. A calendar page from 1971 in which one catches a glimpse of the pagoda of Shwedagon, the holiest Buddhist pagoda in Burma, is the focus of one of Lazaro's paintings (pl. 24). It belongs to the *Cini Film* series, based on the artist's father's 8mm home movies. The paintings chronicle the artist's childhood in the Armley district of Leeds and the UK, where his mother and father, who both sailed from Rangoon to England in the 1950s, eventually settled. At a time when Britain is being radically reconceived, it seemed important to acknowledge Cambridge, where the exhibition

opens, as a place of resettlement. Lazaro's newly created paintings based on his encounters with individuals who migrated to Cambridge, from different places across the world, take their stories and the objects of exile they brought with them as points of departure. These portable objects have the power, through the evocative force they possess for those who hold them dear, to connect their owners from their new homes in Cambridge to their previous re-imagined homelands. Enhanced by the attentive execution of Lazaro's rendering, they conjure the vulnerability of exile and the alienating politics that stand behind individual stories of loss and dispossession.

This exhibition proposes to showcase in depth a small number of artists who engage with displacement and the transitory notion of home that have been pivotal for the modern construction of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Many of them are juxtaposed for the first time. The focus is on the artists' individual viewpoints and the persistence of these themes within their practice. In conjunction, the artists' first-person accounts that follow this essay offer an entry into their singular vision and perspective. In different ways they all challenge prescriptive and constraining definitions of homelands.

- 1 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, Granta, London, 2001, pp. 174–175.
- 2 1–3 millions of people are the commonly used figures. For an interpretation of the Bangladesh war that includes an analysis of the violence committed before the war by Bengalis against non-Bengalis and also casts doubt on some of these widely disseminated figures, see Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War*, Hurst Publishers, London, 2011.
- 3 See Jaffrelot, *A History of Pakistan and its Origins*, Anthem Press, London, 2004, pp. 56–57.
- 4 On Indian artists' response to the war, see Devika Singh, 'Indian art and the Bangladesh War: Somnath Hore, K.G. Subramanyan and Bhupen Khakhar in a time of "upheaval and chaos"', in Natasha Eaton and Alice Correia (eds), *Third Text*, Autumn 2017.
- 5 Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007, p. 201.
- 6 After Partition the problem rapidly became that of the teleological reading of a bifurcated history, marked by a tendency to read back in time the two-nation theory, as illustrated by the official histories released in the 1950s in India and Pakistan.
- 7 Email correspondence with Sohrab Hura, June 2019.
- 8 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008, p. xiii.
- 9 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*, Granta Books, London, p. 4.
- 10 India's economic liberalisation began in 1991. Conversation with Homi K. Bhabha, Dublin, June 2019.

HOMELANDS

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