Introduction

Theorizing Subaltern Secularism in the Crisis of Modern Migration

As the postcolonial and post-Cold War model of global authority takes shape . . . we need to . . . consider how a deliberate engagement with the twentieth century’s histories of suffering might furnish resources for the peaceful accommodation of otherness in relation to fundamental commonality.

—Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*

[The pervasive losses of the twentieth century need to be engaged from the perspective of what remains . . . This attention to remains generates a politics of mourning that might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary.

—David Eng and David Kazanjian, “Introduction: Mourning Remains”

During a taxi ride to the University of Pennsylvania’s Van Pelt library on a freezing day a few years ago, my elderly driver, Naveed Samuel, noted my accent and asked me with an old-fashioned politeness, “Where are you from, Miss?” This usual and too familiar ethnic exchange, typical of immigrants with un-American accents in the United States, led to my revealing that I was from India and asking him where he was from. Immediately, he switched languages and replied in Urdu, “I am not from India—I am from Pakistan.” Acknowledging this, I then inquired about what part of Pakistan he hailed from. “I am from Karachi. But my parents were from India: my father was from Allahabad, and my mother was from Palanpur,” he replied. “Did they go to Pakistan during the Partition?” I asked him. “Yes, they went there in 1947,” he said, “because of the Partition.” He then grew quiet; nothing more was shared about the Partition or his parents’
displacement. I do not know why I then added, “My grandfather was from Karachi.” And then we fell silent: both, in some ways, divided and linked through the history of Partition’s mass displacements, through this shared history of migration, of places lost to our respective families in the melee of the fragmented formation of nations.

I share this small story because it reminds me that the 1947 Partition of India is not only an event that I have been studying and writing about for the last twenty years in the libraries I have inhabited around the world; it is also an unfinished past that scattered millions across the subcontinent and also, eventually, to other shores: North America, East Africa, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom. When the British announced their plans to decolonize and divide India in August 1947, to create the new nations of India and Pakistan on the basis of religion, what followed the drawing of borderlines (over a hasty seven weeks) by the Boundary Commission chaired by the English lawyer Cyril Radcliffe is by now well documented, including in W. H. Auden’s famous 1966 poem “Partition.” Using incomplete and likely inaccurate census data, Radcliffe’s plan distributed cities and villages like cards in a deck. A wave of ethnic violence and mass migration followed. As Hindus and Sikhs attacked Muslims and Muslims attacked Hindus and Sikhs, by unofficial counts, two million died, and between twelve and sixteen million migrated across the new borders by June 1948. This event was, as noted Pakistani American author Bapsi Sidhwa observes, “the largest and
most terrible exchange of population known to history. In this conflict, women and children especially were subjected to sexual violence, abduction, mutilation, and murder. Post-47, new political-institutional formations as well as public discourse instantiated religion as a central category that shaped the identity of citizens across South Asia. Along with the subcontinent’s own particular web of social stratification, this shift ensured that the place of the secular within the national community would remain a vexed affair. The complex relationship between religion and secular citizenship in South Asia has historically shaped how Partition refugees have been treated in postcolonial nation-states; it has also laid the groundwork for, among other things, the hegemonic production of cultural communities as religious communities in Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.

This book begins with an exploration of two issues that dominate public discourses about nationalism across many spaces in the world today—namely, migration and the role of religion in public life. As we mark the seventy-third anniversary of the 1947 Partition in 2020, this book takes up David Eng’s and David Kazanjian’s invitation and turns to what remains after Partition—what Urvashi Butalia calls “the business of living with the consequences of that history.” This spirit—of seeing what remains and what has been created after Partition—animates my inquiry into migration stories across diverse media archives, exploring how they have shaped secularism and citizenship in India and in its diaspora. In doing so, I argue that Partition’s history of violent displacement continues to be a constitutive, everyday dimension of many South Asian lives around the world. In the literal sense, this assertion is true: since 1947, India and Pakistan have fought four wars, Bangladesh was created from East Pakistan after a bloody war in 1971, and the region of Kashmir remains a critical flashpoint for potential nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan. In this context of conflict and crisis, tracking the afterlife of the Partition migrations through the public cultural archives of literature, film, photography, and print culture can help us recognize what else remains (or has been created) after 1947. In the analysis that follows, I draw upon a range of texts and objects that are primarily, although not exclusively, from India and constitute a public cultural archive about migration and citizenship. I show how this archive has created a minor, critical discourse about “restorying” (to use Vishwajyoti Ghosh’s term) the post-47 animosities of Partition. This archive, my book suggests, offers new political visions of secularism and geopolitical peace in the subcontinent. Graphic Migrations thus analyzes the cultural discourse about migration and refugees’ experience from the 1947 Partition, as represented across a range of media, to ask: what is the relationship between the intergenerational narration as well as recuperation of Partition’s migration stories and the contemporary political crisis of secularism unfolding in India and its diaspora?
I turn to the migration stories embedded in this book’s cultural archive as performances that, to appropriate Yến Lê Espiritu’s words, “conjure up social, public, and collective remembering.” Following Espiritu, I see this book as a “bringing together of seemingly different and disconnected events, communities, histories, and spaces in order to illuminate what would otherwise not be visible about the contours, contents, and afterlives of war and empire,” past and ongoing, in transnational South Asia. In Nothing Ever Dies, Viet Thanh Nguyen describes what he calls “an ethics of memory” in the texts and objects that address the U.S. war in Vietnam; this ethics, for Nguyen, is “a just memory that strives to remember both one’s own and others.” This commitment to a just memory resonates: my desire is not only to write the gendered refugee’s memory into the story of the nation in South Asia and in South Asian America but also to argue that it is through this labor of remembering and storying the legacies of division and displacement, at once aesthetic and political, that we can reinvent a just community in the public sphere. This goal is urgent, especially because Partition’s particular combination of the religious territorialization of political division, the “expulsions” (to use Saskia Sassen’s term) of millions, and the production of normative citizenship on the basis of religion and ethnicity have become too familiar and banal on the stage of world history in the contemporary moment. Witness the mass expulsions of Rohingya Muslims, Syrians, or Tamil Sri Lankans by war and state violence in the twenty-first century, accompanied by the new, often institutionalized modes of discrimination against Muslims in democratic societies, including the United States. The story I tell here, then, about what remains and what has been created after the 1947 Partition migrations is one that reflects more broadly on how geopolitical conflict, religion, and displacement have unfolded in world history and across many national contexts in the ensuing decades. A comparative and transnational approach to decolonization, division, and displacement in the mid-twentieth century has grown increasingly visible in contemporary public culture as well as scholarship. From a host of interdisciplinary and multimedia standpoints, recent cultural production as well as scholarly conversation have endeavored to recast apparently disparate national histories as part of a transnational history of modern migration. In the following section, I explain how this book resonates with this new comparative dialogue and intervenes in it, by way of its focus on migration stories and the cultural imagination of gendered secular citizenship.

The Remains of Partition: Art, Storytelling, and Public Culture

The cultural restorying of the Partition migrations, in ways that situate 1947 in a transnational conversation about world history, has attracted new
energy in the last decade. For instance, a 2013 exhibition of videos, prints, photographs, paintings, sculptures, and installations titled *Lines of Control* at Cornell University’s Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art was part of an ongoing initiative started in 2005 by the London-based nonprofit arts organization Green Cardamom. Curated by Iftikhar Dadi, Hammad Nasar, and Ellen Avril, the exhibition explored partition as a productive space in a transnational context. The works were startling, playful, and profoundly moving, as they addressed the issues that emerge (and, indeed, remain) when land and communities are divided to create new nations. While a majority of the artists focused on India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the exhibition also included work by artists and scholars who expansively addressed partition in other geographies, including North and South Korea, Ireland and Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine, and Sudan and South Sudan.11 The exhibition thus exemplified postcolonial critique, insofar as “postcolonialism has always been about the ongoing life of residues, living remains, [and] lingering legacies.”12 Relatedly, Arie Dubnov and Laura Robson have curated a similar comparative historical exploration of decolonization and partitions. They observe, “Partition is not a long-standing or natural solution to the problem of pluralism; it is a consequence of a particular alignment of global interests, dating from the inter-war period, that privileged ethnic nationalisms and ethnically purified nation-states as the building blocks of a modern world order.”13 Inherent in these geopolitical conditions of the mid-twentieth century, then, were the tendencies toward ethnic homogeneity and ethnonationalism that, in the 1980s and 1990s, would generate genocidal violence and mass expulsions across Asia and Africa. If, as Deepika Bahri notes, “the work of the artist remains the exercise of memory and recollection,”14 then the *Lines of Control* exhibition foregrounded two dimensions of postcolonial modernity central to *Graphic Migrations*. One is that geopolitical partition—whether called that or not—has dominated the post-1947 political histories of belonging and citizenship in many geographies across the world. Spanning such spaces as India, Korea, Vietnam, China, Germany, and others, the act of political division to create different nation-states has split many societies hitherto undivided. The other is that artistic praxis can create new spaces for us to apprehend and illuminate that which remains, recollects, and is created after partition. Talal Asad suggests, “The past is a legitimate object of critique from the standpoint of the present just as the present is an object of critique from the standpoint of the past.”15 This dual approach informs my approach to the past of the Partition migrations, as I turn to them to understand their specific shape and texture as well as to understand present-day India and South Asian America.

Questions that preoccupy this inquiry include the following: How did the violent Partition migrations, given that they were shaped by religious or
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Ethnic difference, shape postcolonial discourses about secularism in independent India and beyond? In our cultural archives—of fiction, memoir, oral histories, and visual culture—what is the relation between stories about displacement and rhetorics about ethno-nationalism? What is the role of gendered refugees in new postcolonial national cultures, and what is their relation to the secular? What new insights into the legacies of the Partition migrations emerge through the South Asian diaspora? This book tracks the changing fates of the secular and secular citizenship in South Asian and South Asian American art and media after Partition’s ethnic migrations. Further, it argues that this archive of art and media makes visible the tensions that coalesce around religion and citizenship, even as it identifies an insurgent practice, a “subaltern secular,” that displaces many of the ethno-nationalist verities of post-Partition South Asia and South Asian America. Doing so also entails “provincializing Europe” as well as America; it requires displacing Europe and America as the primary subjects of world history, attending instead to the political divisions and related migrations that accompanied mid-twentieth-century decolonization and pre–Cold War politics across the world. Graphic Migrations dwells on these divisions, displacements, and secular intimacies of post-47 Asia and explores their impact on the Asian American experience. Resonant with the new energies of Critical Refugee Studies and Asian American approaches to Cold War studies, as exemplified in such works as Yến Lê Espiritu’s Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees, Lisa Yoneyama’s Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes, Lisa Lowe’s The Intimacies of Four Continents, Cathy Schlund-Vials’s War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work, Josephine Nock-Hee Park’s Cold War Friendships: Korea, Vietnam, and Asian American Literature, and Viet Thanh Nguyen’s Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War—which, in different ways, note the intricate historical relations between Asia and North America constituted through violence and displacement—I insist that we cannot separate the story of modern decolonization in South Asia from the intimate, immigrant histories of contemporary Asian American life.

Since the late 1990s, new attention to this gendered history and memory of the Partition has generated the field of Partition Studies, as historians and cultural studies scholars—especially feminist scholars—have revisited Partition from a range of perspectives. While literary and film critics have analyzed the prolific works that bear witness to the complex violence of Partition, feminist historians have criticized the patriarchal construction of women as objects of families and communities at this time—a construct that undermines their access to equal rights as political subjects as well as citizens. It also underlies the subsequent forced repatriation of women who
had been abducted and raped in 1947 and since resettled with new families in India and Pakistan. A substantial body of work also now exists on the regional histories of particular linguistic communities—Sindhis, Bengalis, and Punjabis—that were the largest populations affected by Partition. Finally, much critical attention in this field, including in my own work, hitherto has been devoted to ethnic violence, memory, and trauma.

Extending the arena of these scholarly conversations in Partition Studies but shifting focus to the dimension of displacement, this book’s purpose is to examine the migration stories of 1947 and their legacies for the cultural imagination of secularism and gendered citizenship. In this aim, it traverses the subcontinent and its diasporas; while anchored in literary cultures, it is engaged with the subcontinental and diasporic public cultural exploration of the remains of decolonization through other media, objects, and practices. Accordingly, it considers literary fiction in dialogue with cinema, photography, oral histories, advertising, experimental art installations, and new digital media archives of migrant testimonies, such as the 1947 Partition Archive. The Partition migrations’ increased relevance in South Asian public spheres across media forms is evident in the transnational, new media oral history projects that have emerged in the last decade. It is also evident in the proliferation of literary and cinematic production as well as in the phenomenal success of the 2013 Partition-themed commercial “Reunion,” which Google created for its South Asian markets; I evaluate this neoliberal aesthetic mapping of Partition’s trauma and globalization later. It is clear, then, that the remembering of 1947 is complex and newly resonant across South Asia. As I show through the feminist and queer perspectives and representations considered here, it is also profoundly gendered: just as ethnic/religious difference functions as a central category defining citizenship, heteronormative conceptions of gender, sexuality, and belonging critically mark the experiences of displacement and citizenship in the cultural archive under consideration in this book. Among my arguments is that this remembering of Partition is, at least in part, an ethico-political response to the current crisis of secularism unfolding in India, where minority citizens continue to experience increasingly violent disenfranchisement, loss of citizenship, gendered violence, and daily discrimination (I elaborate on the signs of this crisis later in this Introduction). Thus, in the memory work ongoing across texts, media, and institutions, intellectual vigilance must attend not only to memorializing Partition but also to how we institutionally memorialize it toward bipartisan political ends.

This question of how memory projects address the standpoint of the present and articulate modes of recuperation and redress has been central to much Asian American scholarship. Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, “Given the scale of so many historical traumas, it can only be the case that for many
survivors, witnesses, and inheritors, the past can only be worked through together, in collectivity and community, in struggle and solidarity. This effort of a mass approach to memory should involve a confrontation with the present as much as the past, for it is today’s material inequalities that help to shape mnemonic inequities.”20 My book uncovers how migration stories and their graphic address of national citizenship in this multimedia archive imagine collectivity, negotiate community, and forge transnational as well as secular solidarities. As it chronicles the representation of Partition migrations across various media—literature, film, new media, and print culture—Graphic Migrations offers a new story about how the 1947 migrations, decolonization, and the refugee experience have shaped discourses about gendered citizenship and secularism in India and, more broadly, in South Asian America.

I draw upon the work of Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies Collective, which, nearly four decades ago, called for seeing the Indian peasant less as an object and more as an agent of national history. In this book, I argue that we must recognize the migrant—and, indeed, the refugee—as an agent of national history. In other words, the refugee is constitutive of the nation. I realize that this claim is radical; by convention, refugees are often discursively constructed as outsiders, as objects of pity, as peripheral subjects, and as burdens on the places and nations in which they arrive. Yet I am arguing, as have other scholars, for the urgent necessity of displacing this dominant rhetoric as well as this political view. Yasmin Saikia eloquently observes, “To assert its power, official history in South Asia since the colonial times and even now depends on people forgetting much of the lived past. We cannot afford this kind of history any longer. The different, possible narratives preserved in people’s memories must be explored and acknowledged if we in South Asia are to confront what decolonization really means.”21 Graphic Migrations explores narratives of Partition migrants’ memories and engages these with the cultural representation of decolonization and displacement in literature, film, print culture, advertising, and photography. By weaving together a range of representations of migration across media, I labor to uncover how migrants and refugees, through their embodied signification and their ethical practices, have become political critics as well as literal and figurative producers of secular imagined communities in postcolonial South Asia.

In the following sections, I discuss subaltern secular and migrant, the key epistemic categories that organize my analysis and constitute its conceptual scaffolding. In the ensuing chapters, I orient them toward feminist aesthetic, ethical, and ecological critiques of state, citizenship, and geopolitical conflict. Whether South Asian or Syrian, migration narratives are a powerful starting point from which we can rethink recent debates about how and
when religion and secularism appear in public life and shape community—witness the work of Saba Mahmood, Talal Asad, Judith Butler, and others in the last decade. The South Asian negotiation of migration, religion, and conflict in public culture offers an alternative to the model of secularism in European Enlightenment modernity, where it has largely signaled the desacralization of cultures. I use the terms *ethnic* and *religious* interchangeably when referring to the political modernity of colonial identities, such as Hindu and Muslim; my goal is to interrupt discourses that reproduce the false binary of religion versus modernity, such that particular non-Western religious communities and identities get marked as atavistic, communal, not modern, and recidivistic others to the project of post-Enlightenment modernity. Further, engaging Subaltern Studies with anthropologist Talal Asad’s concept of a historically mobile “secular” (as distinct from the static ideology of secularism), I describe what I call the *subaltern secular*—the set of embodied acts, practices, performances, and representations in public culture that emerges from/about migrants and minorities in the nation-state. Following this discussion, I present the stakes that organize the story of how migration animates the lived secular and problematizes the postcolonial state, even as it inaugurates new vernacular aesthetic modes of building imagined communities. The next section explains the contours of the current crisis of political secularism in India and its transnational links to post-9/11 America, Islamophobia, and the Indian American diaspora. This contemporary crisis shapes minority rights and citizenship in the subcontinent and the diaspora; it also signals the stakes and relevance of this project to rethink Partition and the postcolonial nation-state’s production of statelessness.

**Secularism in Crisis**

Scholars following developments in India through mainstream news media and public sphere accounts will be familiar with the changing face of ethno-nationalist public discourse since the 1990s, as Indians across classes and communities have debated the meaning and relevance of secularism, national culture, and equal citizenship in India. There is a new sense of anxiety, as recent political developments as well as embodied violence experienced by members of minority communities have created fear and concern across urban and rural India. In this atmosphere of anxiety and fear, geopolitical relations in the region are complex and ambivalent. Tensions over the political reorganization of and suppression of dissent in Jammu and Kashmir are high. Yet, in a heartening pro-peace development, a new bilateral agreement between India and Pakistan has led to the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor, allowing Indian citizens to cross the border to visit
one of the holiest Sikh shrines in Kartarpur for the very first time; visitors get a special permit for the day and thus bypass the formidable process of getting a visa. The corridor was inaugurated by Indian prime minister (PM) Narendra Modi and Pakistani PM Imran Khan on November 9, 2019. Thus far, leading political figures, such as former Indian PM Manmohan Singh, as well as ordinary citizens have crossed the border to visit the shrine. This opportunity to facilitate cross-border travel, although undergirded by the privileged status accorded to religious pilgrimage, represents a positive political step between the two nation-states. At the time of this writing, it is unclear what the future holds for Kashmir, India, and South Asia; for anyone following Indian politics, it should be increasingly evident that, since 2014, secularism in India has been in crisis.

Of course, the long history of India’s move to the right over the course of the twentieth century has made secularism a contested discourse. Shabnum Tejani has well documented the evolution of an ideology of secularism in India through the anti-colonial nationalist movement, from 1890 to 1950. My concern is with the increasingly under siege space for secularism post-1990, in a country whose political institutions had constitutionally enshrined the idea of the Indian nation as a secular and inclusive community. In Walled States, Waning Sovereignty, Wendy Brown notes, “As it is weakened and rivaled by other forces, what remains of nation-state sovereignty becomes openly and aggressively rather than passively theological. So also do popular desires for restored sovereign might and protection carry a strongly religious aura.” Brown’s theorization of the sovereign theological and walled nation-state illuminates the changing nationalisms we are witnessing across Asia, Europe, and North America. In 2007, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Anuradha Dingwaney Needham edited a collection of essays that analyze the Indian crisis of secularism from a range of disciplinary perspectives. These essays, as Rajan and Needham note, are committed to “revisioning secularism and its modalities: secularism possesses too much energy for it to be only dismissed as useless or obsolete.” They address the spread of violent extremism and polarization across India, its historical roots and cultural antecedents, and its particular imbrication with other forms of difference, such as caste and gender. Since that reckoning, this crisis of secularism in the face of hegemonic ethno-nationalism has persisted—and, I suggest, intensified. Public and private discourses in India have increasingly diminished the spaces in which interethnic or interreligious relations are unmarred by othering and conflict. Significantly, a parallel mode of polarization emerged in the United States after the attacks of September 11, 2001, that racialized religious identities and instigated the growing visibility of minority immigrant identities oriented around religion in the South Asian American diaspora. Hate
crimes and other forms of discrimination against Arab Americans, Sikh Americans, Muslim Americans, and anyone appearing Brown dramatically changed the experience of a hitherto invisible model minority group, which became a threatening “other” after 9/11. This shift unleashed new modes of racialization and community formation for South Asian Americans. While I have commented on this racialization of US citizenship elsewhere, scholars including Lopamudra Basu have recently documented its impact through Asian American culture, as in Ayad Akhtar’s plays. From the emergence of religion-based identities in the diaspora, such as “Hindu American”; the proliferation of minority student organizations on US campuses that center on religion; and the increasing memberships and political clout of affluent religious sectarian communities (courted by local politicians from New Jersey, to Illinois, to Georgia), we are witnessing a reinvention of South Asian American identity that fissures along religious lines, nurtured in community centers that are increasingly based inside spaces of worship, be they Hindu temples, Sikh gurdwaras, or Muslim mosques.

What is the genealogy of this disappearing secular and its effect on lives in post-47 South Asia and Asian America? How can we understand its changing historical manifestation in the spaces of culture, lived experience, and storytelling? In what sense might we call the secular a minority discourse and a subaltern practice, despite its constitutional enshrinement? Priya Kumar notes the complexities and contradictions of the political understanding of “secularism” as it appears in India’s constitutional commitment: “If it has been asked to grapple with the thorny question of multi-religious and multiethnic coexistence and to serve as a means of unifying the nation, then it has also been deployed to provide state protection to minority religious communities. Thus, it has been asked to negotiate between uniform rights and liberal citizenship on the one hand, and special rights for minority religious groups, on the other.” In the Indian context, questions about religion and secularism have been intimately tied to the notion of justice since independence. As Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph observe, rather than being based on the division between the state and religion, the “Indian constitution declares India to be a secular (and socialist and democratic) state,” one that is “neutral and impartial toward all religions.” Thus, the constitution recognizes all religions as equal and as constitutive of equal but separate communities: “In the language of Article 25 of the Constitution, as interpreted by the Supreme Court, every person shall have the protection of the law to profess, practice and propagate his/her religion.” Yet there is a difference between formal constitutional political secularism and the historical realities of secularism as they play out in state politics as well as in the lived experience of Indian citizens. Anshuman Mondal ably parses this
difference: as he points out, while the Indian state constitutionally adopts “a position of secular neutrality” standing above and beyond all religious or faith-based communities, in practice, it has functioned to protect minority communities and interests through such mechanisms as separate electorates as well as “reserved quotas for government appointments, resource distribution and the recognition of special legal provisions for Muslims with respect to personal law.”

Mahmood invites us to historicize such formations of secularism in postcolonial societies in the Global South as they relate to minority rights and equal citizenship. By analyzing secularism’s relation to the modern nation-state as well as civil society in Egypt, Mahmood illuminates how the “two dimensions of political secularism—its regulatory impulse and its promise of freedom—are thoroughly intertwined, each necessary to the enactment of the other.” Thus, she reminds us that, for many such communities and societies, secularism “also entails the reordering and remaking of religious life” in ways that might be “themselves foreign to the life of the religions and peoples it organizes.” Given this situation, Mahmood cautions us to be alert to the possibilities and perils of secularism in postcolonial societies: “This dimension of political secularism—shot through as it is with paradoxes and instabilities—needs to be understood for the life worlds it creates, the forms of exclusion and violence it entails, the kinds of hierarchies it generates, and those it seeks to undermine.” In this book, I hope to remain attentive to this duality that characterizes political secularism; I want to explore the imaginative possibilities and the historical limits of the invention and performance of the lived secular and its impact on minority rights as well as citizenship in South Asian cultural contexts. In other words, I locate what Robert J. Young describes as the secular practices that “still figure in significant ways in an alternative configuration with the religious.” Thus, while I acknowledge Mahmood’s argument that political state secularism can be productive of the very interreligious or interethnic conflict that it claims to be an alternative to, I want to create space, through my analysis of a unique cultural archive, for uncovering new formations and performances of the “secular”—in migrant and refugee experiences—that interrogate not only ethno-nationalism but also the political institutions of state modernity from a minor perspective. In the process, I suggest, these cultural texts about migration, memory, and citizenship are counter-narratives that invent alternative ways of imagining community within and beyond the nation.

The complexity of the relations among the state, religious identities, and citizens’ rights and the creation of a peaceful civil society are well addressed in the prolific body of work by Mushirul Hasan. Acknowledging the historical
reality of the political life of Islam and documenting the heterogeneity of what constitutes it, Hasan argues that beyond the simplistic and reductive polarization of the secularism versus communalism debate, we need to examine how religion is lived in syncretic modes in a global and secular civil society, even as we carefully attend to the relation between the state and religion. Indeed, Hasan asserts, “in a society where religion plays a dominant role in virtually every walk of life it is my business and the business of every historian to bring secularism into our discussions, and to affirm its validity as a principle guiding the nation.”37 Hasan invokes here the responsibility of the scholar to offer a political critique of ethno-nationalism and to contest its claims on the nation as an imagined community. Similarly, Asad notes the link between secularism and the liberal state, arguing that “secularism and liberal democracy were centrally involved in linking religion to the nation, attaining civil rights for citizens (especially social and political equality), and thus forming the liberal democratic state as a power state.”38 In India, Deepa Ollapally reminds us that, although the Indian Supreme Court has consistently upheld political secularism, “the Indian state’s political secularism had become increasingly strained, particularly since the 1980s.”39 Interestingly, after September 11, 2001, the question of religion and its role in the public sphere also emerged at the forefront in public debates about citizenship and belonging in European American contexts.40 Yet this question has long held much resonance in postcolonial societies, where decolonization was often marked by religious/ethnic violence that displaced large numbers of people, turning them into ethnically marked refugees (internal and external) stranded in a system of nation-states.

Disentangling these various connotations of secularism for the Indian context is the first step. In his anthropology of secularism, Asad suggestively argues that instead of subscribing to discourses that posit religion and secularism as inherently opposed and static ideologies, we are better served by exploring the “secular” as constituted through a set of embodied practices, as an articulation always in flux.41 He proffers that the secular is “a concept that brings together certain behaviours, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life.”42 Arguing that “the sacred and the secular depend on each other,”43 Asad offers “a counter to the triumphalist history of the secular” that shows how the secular “is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred).”44 In her analysis of secularism, Tejani similarly argues for a rethinking of the simplistic divisions between secularism and communalism that have long shaped discourses about the role of religion in public and political life in India. Working back from our present moment of crisis,
the chapters of this book open up a series of inquiries into the secular as it becomes legible in the stories of migration and the refugee experience from the 1947 Partition of India—a modern division of territory based on religion. Questions under consideration include the following: Did the violent Partition migrations of 1947 generate the cultural demise of the secular? Does the experience of forced migration, statelessness, and loss turn the refugee away from the secular? Beyond the official discourses of state secularism, what can our cultural archive of the Partition migrations illuminate about modern statelessness, citizenship, and lived secularism?

Displacing conventional approaches that treat secularism as an elite cosmopolitanism or a Western political ideology, and building on the work of Edward Said, Judith Butler, and Talal Asad, I deploy the term secular in a performative sense: it refers to the set of embodied acts, practices, and representations through which one articulates an ethical relationship with subjects who occupy that space of difference. In an interview in which he was questioned about his brave conception of secular criticism and the secular intellectual, Said explained that, for him, “the dense fabric of secular life can’t be herded under the rubric of national identity or can’t be made entirely to respond to this phony idea of a paranoid frontier separating ‘us’ from ‘them’—which is a repetition of the old sort of Orientalist model.”45 This productive dissonance between secular life and the borders of national identity could not be more evident than in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, Arundhati Roy, and Shauna Singh Baldwin or in the Indian and Pakistani films Mammo and Khamosh Pani that this book examines. The cultural works I consider represent the fraught, incomplete, and dense fabric of secular life as it is invented, contested, and under erasure. In The Idea of Human Rights, Charles Beitz illuminates why we need to understand human rights not as an abstract political idea but as “an emergent political practice.”46 Similarly, I suggest that the secular emerges as a political and ethical practice, following the violent, religion-based mass migrations of decolonization in South Asia. In The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism, Ashis Nandy observes that within India and the West, we can find the capacious ability to live with cultural ambiguity and instability, a mode that rejects the simplistic and false opposition of mythic spiritualism or a radical Westernized rationality.47 This generative instability for me is linked to the emergent secular—a resistant embodied performance, a practice, and an ethical mode of living that, with this book, I try to identify in the spaces of public culture and everyday life. For me, this mode of living is a form of planetary cohabitation that instantiates a political critique of decolonization and ethno-nationalism.

In Graphic Migrations, then, I inquire into the discursive grammar of “the secular” as it appears in Indian and South Asian American culture,
even as I unravel the relationship between migration and the secular after the 1947 Partition. Engaging Asad’s conception of “the secular” as a presence and a practice constantly made and remade through representations, actions, bodies, and objects in everyday life, I track how literary and film texts as well as print and digital cultures invent and address the relationship between violent migrations and this historically mobile “secular” (distinct from the static ideology of “secularism”) in the sensual, political formation of individual subjectivity and collective community. In the process, I alight on particular aesthetic representations of gendered migrants and citizens as I map hegemonic as well as critical discourses about belonging, nationalism, and religion in India and its North American diaspora.

One might ask why I turn to migration stories to tell the story about Indian secularism or South Asian secular practices. To be sure, many scholars, including Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Manav Ratti, and Priya Kumar, have well analyzed the literary representation of Indian secularism more broadly. Further, within the field of South Asian literature and culture, as Neha Vora has also observed, the study of Indian migration has traditionally involved a focus on the circuits that took Indians to the West. However, I turn to migration stories about and after 1947 to interrupt the present circumstance of hegemonic and violent ethno-nationalism in South Asia and South Asian America. I argue that the historical experience of Partition’s mass migration—its cultural representation and its political legacies—offers us new “fugitive knowledges” of how the secular and religion are imbricated, then and now; it illuminates how, from the midst of violent, religion-based dispossession, those who are abjected and exiled can forge the “secular” as a political practice and as an ethical, nonviolent response toward geopolitical peace in the subcontinent. Indeed, Butler suggests that “the very possibility of ethical relation depends on a certain condition of dispossession from national modes of belonging, a dispossession that characterizes our relationality from the start, and so the possibility of any ethical relation.” The radical marginality (if not invisibility) of millions of dispossessed Partition refugees in our hegemonic histories and discourses of the Indian nation-state marks their minority perspectives, at times, as subaltern, in relation to the nation-state. The texts in my cultural archive locate the emergence of a minor, ethical secular in this subalternity. Engaging the scholarship of the Subaltern Studies Collective, in this book, I identify and name this minor secularism—one emerging in the spaces of minorities’ lived experience—the “subaltern secular.” This secular does not entail the rejection of religion; indeed, it is a mode of pluralism, planetary cohabitation, and relationality that is premised on the recognition that, “very often, religion functions as a matrix of subject formation, an embedded framework for valuations, a mode of belonging, and embodied social practice.”
Introduction

How gender, race, class, caste, nationality, ecology, and disability shape the cultural imagination of Partition's refugees, citizens, and subaltern secularisms is part of the story I tell in this book.

As such, gender is central in my intersectional analysis of the public cultural representation of post-47 migration and secularism. Recent feminist scholarship across the disciplines on South Asia and South Asian America by Kumkum Sangari, Sudesh Vaid, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Asha Nadkarni, Jigna Desai, and Gita Rajan (among others) has illuminated the history of South Asian women's identities, roles, and rights in the context of colonialism and postcolonial independence. In Partition Studies, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin uncover the violence experienced by abducted women during the Partition, tracing the complicity of the patriarchal state and ethnic community in rendering female agency and access to equal citizenship subaltern. In this book, I complement this feminist historiography by examining how notions of heteronormative masculinity and femininity have marked subjectivity, citizenship, and statelessness during and after decolonization. In this multimedia archive of migration stories, most of the artists and cultural producers considered are women and feminists. They represent displacement and citizenship, as well as its failures, and provide a keen eye on how heteronormative gender norms have shaped historical experience and subject formation under decolonization and patriarchal postcoloniality. They illuminate subaltern intimacies and minority solidarities; their stories about gender, embodiment, violence, family, and kinship offer a powerful critique of heteronormative ethno-nationalism, often suggesting a more inclusive and secular vision as an alternative. On the one hand, my analysis uncovers how dominant texts—from Hindi cinema to media and print culture—reproduce or rearticulate heteronormative ideas about gendered citizenship and the national family. On the other, it argues that some literary works as well as art films disrupt these sedimented normative ideas about gender, sexuality, and belonging, offering in the process a feminist critique of how hegemonic nationalism and geopolitical conflict generate statelessness. Linking both is my analysis of how encoding gendered embodiment and bodily performance becomes central, across media, to the cultural project of imagining belonging and witnessing histories of loss on the peripheries of the nation. Schlund-Vials has analyzed how some Cambodian American cultural texts do memory work that challenges the state-sanctioned forgetting of genocide. They “memorialize the passing of family members, homelands, and childhoods to instantiate juridical claims of profound communal injury in need of recognition and justice” as well as to “monumentalize survivor remembrance and recuperate refugee selfhood.” In the next section, I consider how collective storytelling events in the South Asian American diaspora about the Partition
migrations can constitute one form of diasporic memory work—bearing witness to the refugee experience under decolonization and instantiating a transnational, ethical secular.

Restorying Migration: The Popular Representation of Refugees’ Stories

The chronicler is the history-teller. . . . In the storyteller the chronicler is preserved in changed form, secularized, as it were.

—WALTER BENJAMIN, “The Storyteller”

In April 2016, a unique community event in Philadelphia aimed at generating a new public dialogue on the 1947 Partition migrations revolved around storytelling. In a tiny, intrepid gallery called Twelve Gates Arts that was devoted to South Asia–related artwork, I was part of a collaboration to organize an event called “Voices of Partition,” presenting witness voices from India and Pakistan. In the birthplace of America, Indian and Pakistani Americans gathered to share memories of the birth of India and Pakistan. Co-hosted by the artists and historians behind the online digital video project the 1947 Partition Archive as part of their global series ‘Voices of Partition,’ it was an unexpected success: a flood of RSVPs meant that the gallery had to double its seats; people were standing and sitting on the floor in the aisles, just squeezing into the space to listen. Three local South Asian American senior citizens—Hindu and Muslim—shared their memories of migrating as children across the new and bloody borders of India and Pakistan in 1947. Dr. Sagar Banka and Dr. Reena Banka had ties to Lyallpur and Lahore (Pakistan), while Mrs. Khurshid Bukhari was originally from Patiala (India). They described the fragmented, episodic memories of how they heard about ethnic violence in August 1947, how their parents decided to leave their homes, and how they slowly rebuilt their lives in new countries, in the shadow of homes and friends lost. Many commonalities emerged across their stories: all said that their parents thought that they were moving temporarily—just until things calmed down. None imagined the closed borders and wars that the two countries share today.

As the gentle and eloquent speakers narrated their experiences and shared old black-and-white photos, a new and palpable emotional community was forged between them and their multigenerational audience. The witnesses shared their memories of that troubled time, inevitably colored by their childhood. Mrs. Bukhari’s harrowing tale of a narrow escape from Amritsar, to which her Patiala-based family had fled after increasing violence, ended with her reminiscing about a certain kachori stall in Patiala. She said, “Oh, I would love to eat those kachoris again.” Someone from
the audience warmly replied, “I’m from Patiala, and that kachori wala is still there!” During the question-and-answer session that followed the presentation, others in the audience who had also migrated in 1947 started sharing their stories, their journeys. A twenty-one-year-old South Asian American young man noted that when he discovered that his grandfather had migrated to Pakistan during Partition, it had transformed his sense of his identity: “I guess we were refugees. Refugees.”

What emerged in this diasporic gathering of those who once were refugees was an eagerness to remember that experience, without rancor toward the other religious community: for example, Dr. Sagar Banka affirmed that beyond religion, the Punjabi language often bound him in closer friendships with Pakistani Punjabis in the United States than with Indians from different parts of India. The shared familiar itineraries of beloved cities (Lahore, Dehradun, Patiala) and schools spun new interreligious, international emotional bonds in this contingent community, surrounded by the red and gold paintings of the Lahore-based artist Komail Aijazuddin. To draw upon Espiritu’s words in a different context, this dialogue vividly illuminated “the living effects of what seems to be over and done with.” Straddling public worlds and private memories, it became a way to “reclaim the ‘something else’ that resides at the intersection between private loss and public commemoration [my italics].”

Established in 2011, Twelve Gates Arts’s goal is, in its founder Aisha Khan’s words, to “create and promote projects that cross geographic and cultural boundaries. The ‘gates’ refer to the fortified gates that walled many ancient cities such as Delhi, Lahore, Jerusalem, and Rhodes—inside which lay the heart of each city’s art and culture.” Cathy Caruth argues, “In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others, but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves.” This Voices of Partition event opened the gates of our political borders and divided cultures, starting an unfinished conversation about the shared losses of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi Americans. This dialogue enacted what Schlund-Vials describes, in a different context, as the “renegotiation of history through survivor memory.” It allowed people, through the sharing of remembrances past, to not only see that Indians and Pakistanis have much more in common than our politicians would like us to acknowledge but also to forge new relations of peace that might have consequences in the subcontinent. In this sense, then, the Voices of Partition conversation that day emerged from what Nguyen calls the idea of “just memory,” where the remembrance of one’s refugee past also invokes the contemporary suffering of other refugees today. These storytelling practices,
as art historian Svetlana Boym notes in her work on immigrant experiences, “do not reconstruct the narrative of one’s roots”; rather, they tell “the story of exile.”61 The event showed how telling stories about migration, loss, and trauma can create exilic intimacy. This intimacy, in Boym’s words, “does not cover up the common loss and pain of displacement but allows one to survive it, to go beyond it.”62 Of course, the project to recall and recognize refugee dispossession also raises the question of what counts as justice and redress. As Yoneyama argues in a different context, “Any idea of a successful transitional justice must then embrace a critical awareness of Cold War legacies in the region [Asia], thus ultimately challenging the dialectics of redressable and unredressable as integral to the (in)justices sustained by post–World War II neocoloniality and the structures of American dominance.”63 This problem of identifying what injustices and traumas are redressable or unredressable under the conditions of post–World War II neocoloniality, and how they are so, is embedded in many of the literary, film, and aesthetic works considered in the forthcoming chapters. Among my arguments is that many of the cultural texts in this archive perform the secular as a way to redress the violence of the modern state’s neocoloniality; they critique the failure of the state and state secularism to protect their displaced subjects while performing, from the periphery, a subaltern secularism.

Refugee stories have not always been welcomed and heard as these were in 2016 in Philadelphia. While the Holocaust scholar Shoshana Felman suggests that “testimony is the literary—or discursive—mode par excellence of our times, and that our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony,”64 in the South Asian context, until the emergence of scholarly work done over the last two decades by Indian feminists and publishers such as Butalia, Menon, and Bhasin, testimonies about the 1947 Partition were largely ignored. To be sure, the facts and figures existed in extensive social scientific studies, especially of the Punjab and Bengal experience.65 But the curious elision of Partition refugees’ testimonies in part stems from the long history of political censorship of refugees’ voices immediately after 1947 in India. For instance, in my first book, Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India ([2008] 2011), I show how in the early national period, articles in urban English-language newspapers in India repeatedly express the fear that refugees’ traumatic stories would incite further ethnic violence against local Muslim citizens. In London, the August 15, 1947, issue of the Times printed the following news item: “District Aflame: The trouble in the east Punjab started about a month ago in the Hoshiarpur district, where refugees from Rawalpindi spread tales of suffering and requested co-religionists to avenge them. A peaceful district was thus set aflame.” On August 26, 1947, an article in the Lahore Times argued,
“The chief danger at the moment is that the tens of thousands of Muslim refugees who are trekking westwards with tales that are grim enough in reality, but become more lurid with every telling, will cause a wave of reprisals in West Punjab.” In one news report, a Sikh man waiting in the long queues for passage via ship from Karachi to Bombay in 1947 is quoted as saying, “Our community is on good terms with the others. We have no fear of our neighbors but fear that feelings may be stirred up against us by the refugees from Punjab” (Times, August 30, 1947). Similarly, an editorial from the Times in August 1947 asserts: “As the refugees toil across the frontier in each direction . . . [s]tories brought by Sikh and Hindu survivors from the Western Punjab caused the slaughter of Muslims in Paharganj and other wards of old Delhi by neighbors with whom they have dwelt in amity for centuries” (Times, September 13, 1947). In the Illustrated Weekly of India, an editorial from September 14, 1947, laments:

The aftermath of the horror in the Punjab is sporadic outbreaks of violence in many parts of the country. Much of this trouble is undoubtedly due to the stories carried by refugees which are one-sided, often distorted and lose nothing in the telling. Refugees deserve everyone’s sympathy and aid in their plight, but however pitiable their cases may be, they cannot be allowed to become a source of vengeance propaganda or the organizers of further killings.

In these accounts, refugees’ narratives are variously described as “propaganda,” “one-sided,” “distorted,” “communalism,” and sources of “venge ance.” Through rhetoric negation, their stories become seen as stories that cause “slaughter.” Such fear and anxiety generated widespread censorship of refugees’ narratives in the Indian public sphere, even as this refugee experience has remained collectively unmemorialized and unmourned for more than seventy years by the nation-states involved—Indian, British, and Pakistani. (This failure to memorialize the Partition is rendered especially tragic by the fact that even the traumatic and shameful Komagata Maru experience of 355 British Asian migrant subjects denied entry into Canada in 1914 has been memorialized by the Indian and Canadian governments.) The above anxious journalistic and political representations of refugees evince the simultaneous universalization and demonization of refugeeness that, as Liisa Malkki shows, mark public discourse about refugees even today: they are at once “a focal object of intervention and knowledge,” a threat to the national community and its private citizens, and a polluting danger in their liminality to “the categorical order of things.”66 Yet, Malkki writes, if we “radically historicize our visions of culture and identity,” then we might