



UNBEARABLE
memories

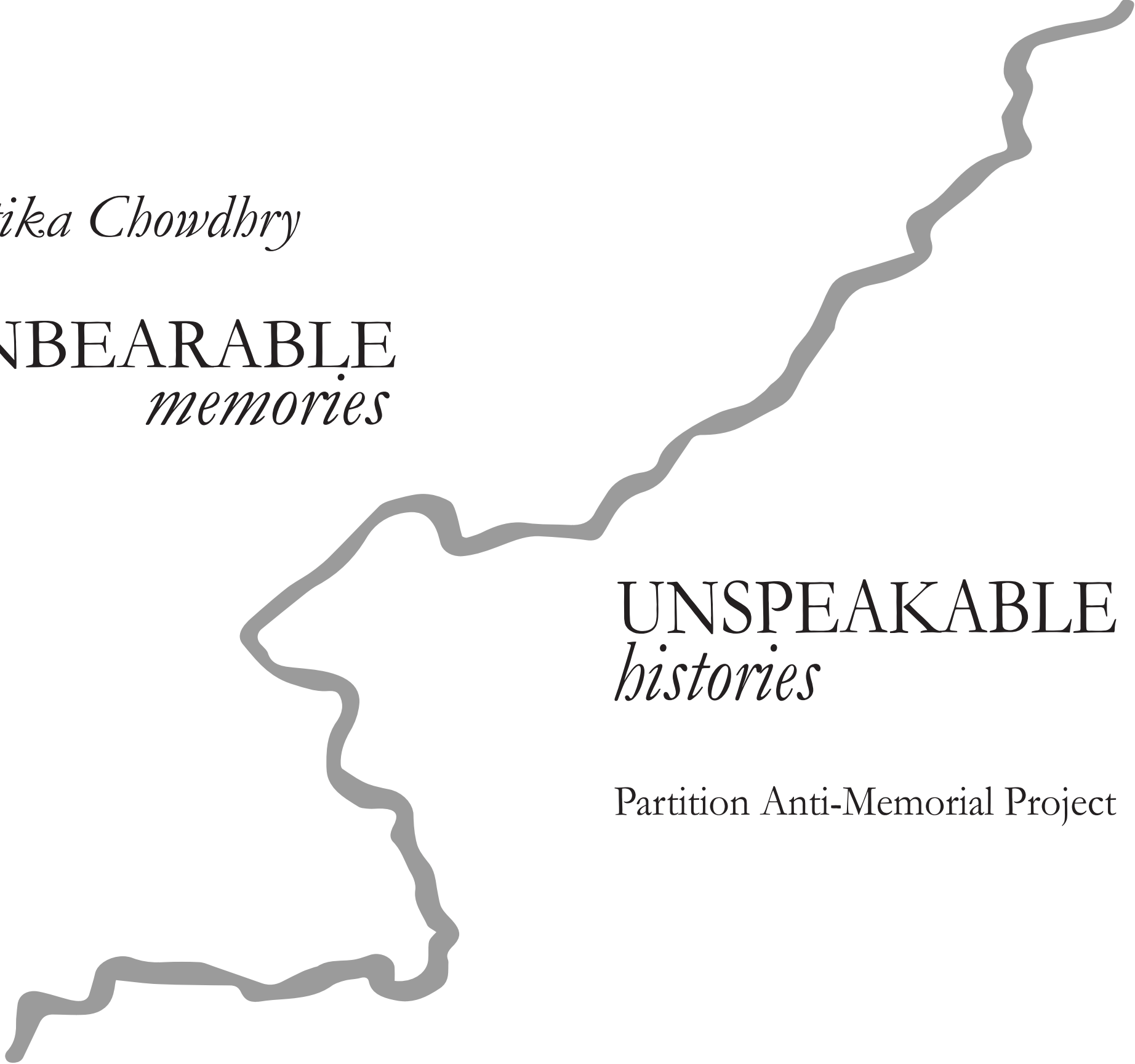
UNSPEAKABLE
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Pritika Chowdhry

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Partition Anti-Memorial Project



India's independence is forever linked with its ghostly twin, the Partition of 1947, which created the two nations, India and Pakistan, and eventually, Bangladesh in 1971. Pritika Chowdhry's exhibition "Unbearable Memories, Unspeakable Histories" commemorates the 75th anniversary of the historic event, through experiential art installations that are temporary anti-memorials.

The Partition triggered the largest and most rapid migration in human history. Over 20 million people were displaced in an unprecedented mass migration. Approximately 2 million people died in the communal violence across the new border, called the Radcliffe Line. What is lesser known is that over 300,000 women are estimated to have been raped and sexually violated during the Partition riots.

The Partition is often called the Holocaust of South Asia, and it is central to modern identity and geopolitics in the Indian subcontinent. Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal has called Partition "the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia." In her words, "A defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present and future."

"Moving to the US in 1999, I was struck by the widespread lack of awareness of Partition's impact for people that lack a personal connection to the event. I realized the urgent need of addressing Partition within my work. With the guidance of my grandparents' firsthand experiences of the Partition in 1947 and 1971, I began creating artworks in 2007 to bear witness to the trauma of the Partition and its enduring effects through the lens of diasporic post-memory," the artist comments.

The Partition Anti-Memorial Project was founded on the 60th anniversary of the Partition in 2007. Over the last fifteen years, Chowdhry has created ten bodies of work that address and examine the many facets of the Partition of India from a counter-memory perspective. To commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Partition, several of these works will be featured in a solo exhibition at the South Asia Institute in Chicago from August to December 2022.

When a memory is unbearable, how does one memorialize it? And when a history is unspeakable, how does one talk about it? The exhibition's title, "Unbearable Memories, Unspeakable Histories" alludes to the painful and silenced narratives that have been elided from mainstream discourses of the Partition.

Partition and Radcliffe Line

Cracking India: The line that still bleeds

The neon sculpture depicting the India-Pakistan border memorializes the Radcliffe Line which was arbitrarily drawn in 1947 to divide British India into India and Pakistan. In 1971, East Pakistan became Bangladesh and the second neon sculpture is a representation of the India-Bangladesh border.

These two violent and bloody partitions embody not only the violent history of the sub-continent but also haunt the current geopolitical landscape of South Asia and are reflected in the neon sculptural poem "Unbearable Memories, Unspeakable Histories" and exhibition title.

While the Radcliffe Line was drawn by men, Sir Cyril Radcliffe the chief architect of the new border, Lord Mountbatten, the last viceroy of British India, and Hindu and Muslim judges who were in the Boundary Commission, these antimemorials are created in a bright pink color, to gender the Radcliffe Line as feminine, to highlight the impact it had on Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Bengali women in 1947 and 1971.

The title of this project is inspired by a novel titled "Cracking India," by Bapsi Sidhwa, a Muslim feminist writer. In the semi-autobiographical novel, a young girl narrates the Partition of India through her eyes.





Partition and Monuments

Broken Column: Monuments of Forgetting

Monuments built in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, in the wake of the Partitions of 1947 and 1971 inform this installation. The primary sites of research are the Minar-e-Pakistan Memorial, in Lahore, Pakistan; the Shaheed Minar, in Dhaka, Bangladesh and the Jallianwala Bagh Memorial in Punjab, India. These relational sites of memory are architectural palimpsests where memories of multiple events have sedimented over time.

This anti-memorial metaphorically triangulates the three sites by juxtaposing the corporeal remains of these monuments and bridging the geographical and political disconnect between these monuments and the countries in which they exist.

This project investigates how collective memories of the partitions of 1947 and 1971 are made legible or erased through these monuments and whether these monuments can be triangulated to function as a “memory triad” that connects as well as exceeds their individual historical contexts.

The title is inspired by a novel titled “Sunlight on a Broken Column,” written by Attia Hossain, a Muslim feminist writer from India. Set on the background of the Partition, it allegorically maps the journey of an orphaned Muslim girl’s journey to freedom, as the nations of India and Pakistan gain their independence.

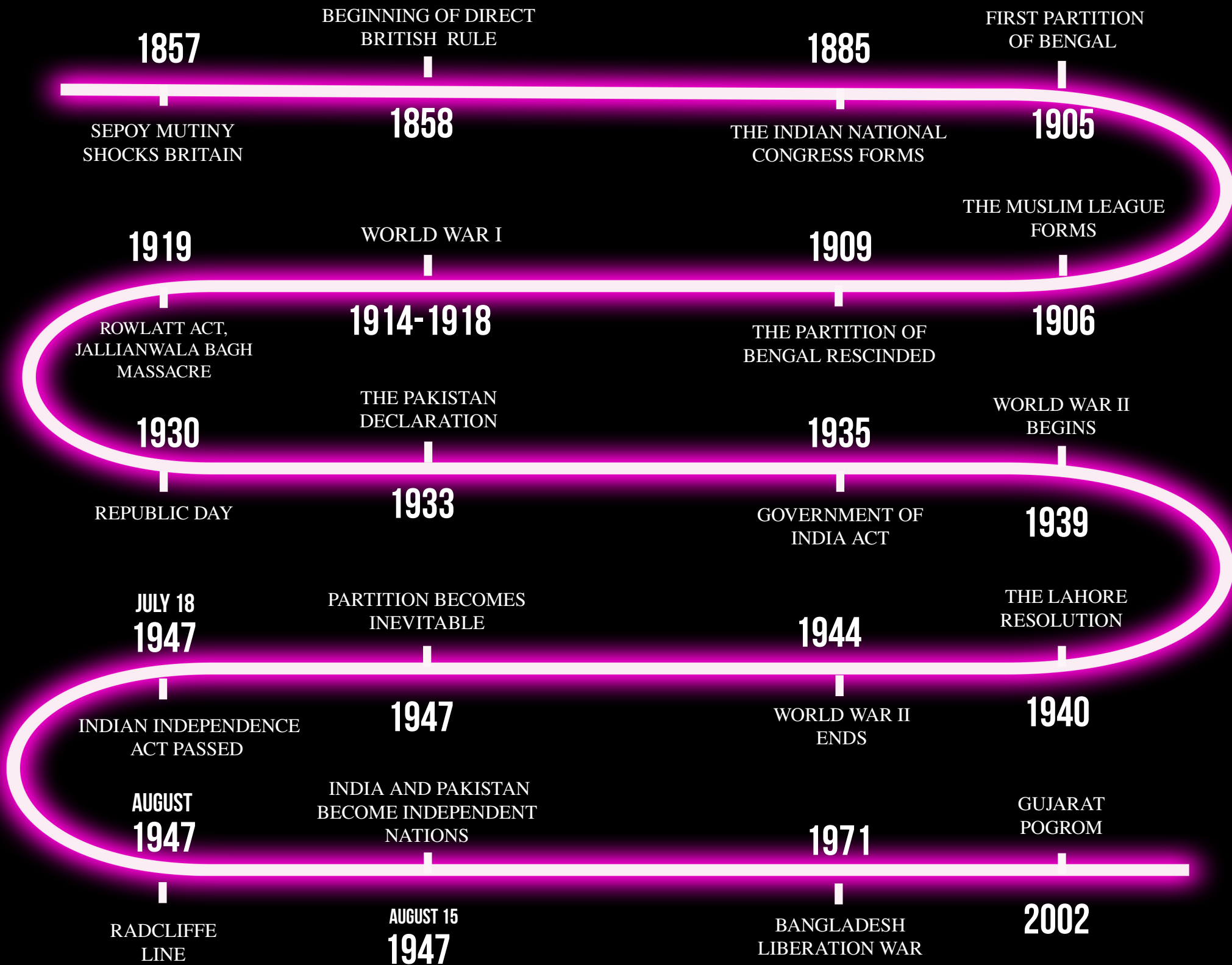
Partition and Mass Graves

This Handful of Dust: Bones, Stones, and Guns

Over 5000 mass graves from the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 have been discovered all over Bangladesh. They are usually found in the process of excavating the earth while constructing foundations of new buildings. The 1971 Liberation War Museum in Dhaka has been storing all the bones that have been unearthed in these mass graves and displays a small portion of this macabre collection in vitrines.

This anti-memorial attempts to process these difficult narratives by creating a transcultural bridge of counter-memories and difficult histories. The title “This Handful of Dust” is inspired by a collection of poems by eminent Bangladeshi poet, Feroze Ahmed-ud-Din.







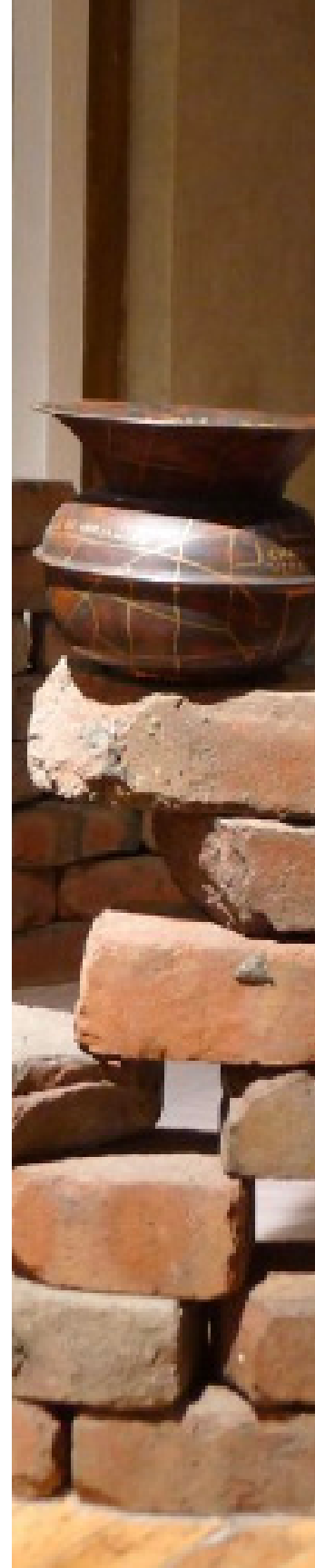
Partition and the English Language

The Master's Tongues: Dialectics of Language
"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." – Audre Lorde

English is the official language in the 54 Commonwealth countries, all of which were former colonies of Britain, in addition to the 25 territories which are still under British governance. Each of these 79 nations have mother tongues other than English, however, English is the official language. This anti-memorial consists of 79 cast iron tongues that have been allowed to rust, and investigates the politics of language from a post-colonial standpoint, specifically how language functions as a tool of colonial power.

Iron was the metal of the Industrial Revolution and one of the major forces of Britain's colonial power. It was used to make domestic objects as well as railroads, ammunition, and monumental buildings. Iron is also a beautiful material at every stage – when it emerges from the foundry, until it rusts over time.

While rust can be seen as deterioration, in the case of iron, it actually strengthens the metal by creating a hard outer shell that protects the metal. The rust is symbolic of the gradual changes and local adaptations in the English language, and symbolizes how the post-colonial appropriation of the master's language can undermine and subvert the master's house. The rust continually changes the tongues in subtle ways and makes the work durational.



Partition and Jallianwala Bagh

An Archive of 1919: The Year of the Crack-Up

In the small town of Amritsar in Punjab, India on April 13, 1919, ninety British soldiers opened fire on a peaceful gathering of 5000 unarmed men, women and children in a garden called the Jallianwala Bagh, that is surrounded on all sides by walls of adjoining buildings. Over 2000 people were killed, including 150 bodies recovered from the well. This anti-memorial is an investigation of the historical events that occurred in the year 1919, from a transnational perspective.

The year after the First World War, many significant events happened around the world in 1919 - the Treaty of Versailles was finalized and other treaties created the countries of the Middle East that we know today and Ireland declared its war of independence from the British empire. Though it was a footnote in world history, the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre as it came to be called, was the catalyst that launched the Purna Swaraj or complete independence movement in India, which eventually led to the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

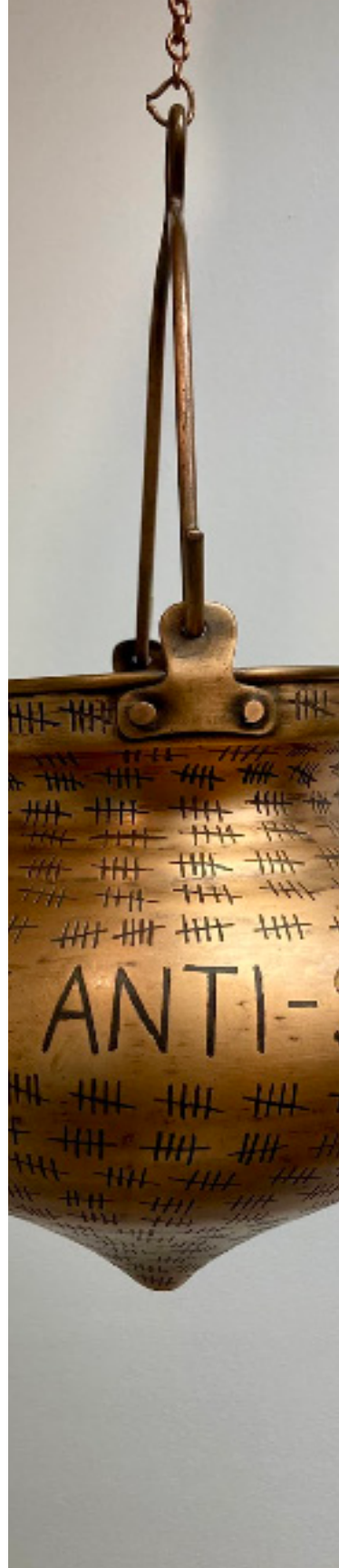
Discarded bodily waste (sputum) functions as a metaphor for the counter-memories of these events, that a nation or a people forget, as if history itself were a cultural waste and is being discarded. Each spittoon is enameled and etched with the name of an event and a map that locates the city and building in which the event occurred and thus functions as an archive of the year 1919 and the spittoons are containers of counter-memories.

Partition and Communal Riots

Memory Leaks: Drips and Traces

This anti-memorial explores the periodic eruptions of communal riots that seem to occur with uncanny regularity in India since 1947. The installation creates a timeline of these riots from 1947 to the Gujarat Pogrom in 2002. It consists of ritual copper vessels used in Hindu temples for cleansing through water and fire. Dharapatras, which are copper pots with a spouted bottom, are used in Hindu temples to drip water or milk on deities. Havankunds are copper containers used in Hindu temples to light the holy fire and make offerings to the fire. Seventeen dharapatras etched with details of as many communal riots, are presented as a durational installation with water dripping out of the bottom of the vessels into seventeen havankunds.

Each havankund contains partially burnt books written in Urdu, the language spoken by Muslims in India and Pakistan. Organized pogroms targeting Muslims are hailed as “cleansing” the land of the impure Muslims by the Hindu right. Frequently, Muslims are killed and burnt, and their houses and shops razed to the ground. The smoldering books are a metaphor for the decimation of Muslim culture in these acts of arson. Chillingly reminiscent of the Partition riots, the communal violence of 1947 keeps leaking into the present through these communal riots.



Partition and Maps / Cartography

Remembering the Crooked Line: The Skin of the Nation

This multi-part installation is an investigation of borders and cartography as technologies of colonization, nation-building and ethnic divisions. It functions as an archive that creates transnational connections between nations that were partitioned in the 20th century.

Maps have been equated with the “skin of the nation” and by extracting real and fictionalized cartographic fragments of the border lines and grafting them onto garments and board games, manifested on materials which have been manipulated to feel like skin. Women’s blouses (cholis), children’s shirts (kurtis), kites, parcheesi panels, and chess panels give material form to that skin.

Parcheesi and chess are cross-cultural motifs that highlight commonalities between nations and allow the viewer to engage with large transnational histories from a personal and individual location. The multi-layered soundscape that is composed of a mother and her two daughters alternately singing the Ring-a-Ring-a-Roses rhyme further mines the charged tensions between the intimate and the national. In the distant background, historic independence speeches by the first heads of the states of the Partitioned nations (India, Pakistan, Israel, and the Irish Republic) can be heard.

The title is inspired by a novel titled “The Crooked Line,” written by Ismat Chughtai, a Muslim feminist writer from India. Set in the late 1940s, it traces the tumultuous life of a Muslim Indian woman from childhood through adolescence to adulthood on the backdrop of the freedom struggle in India.



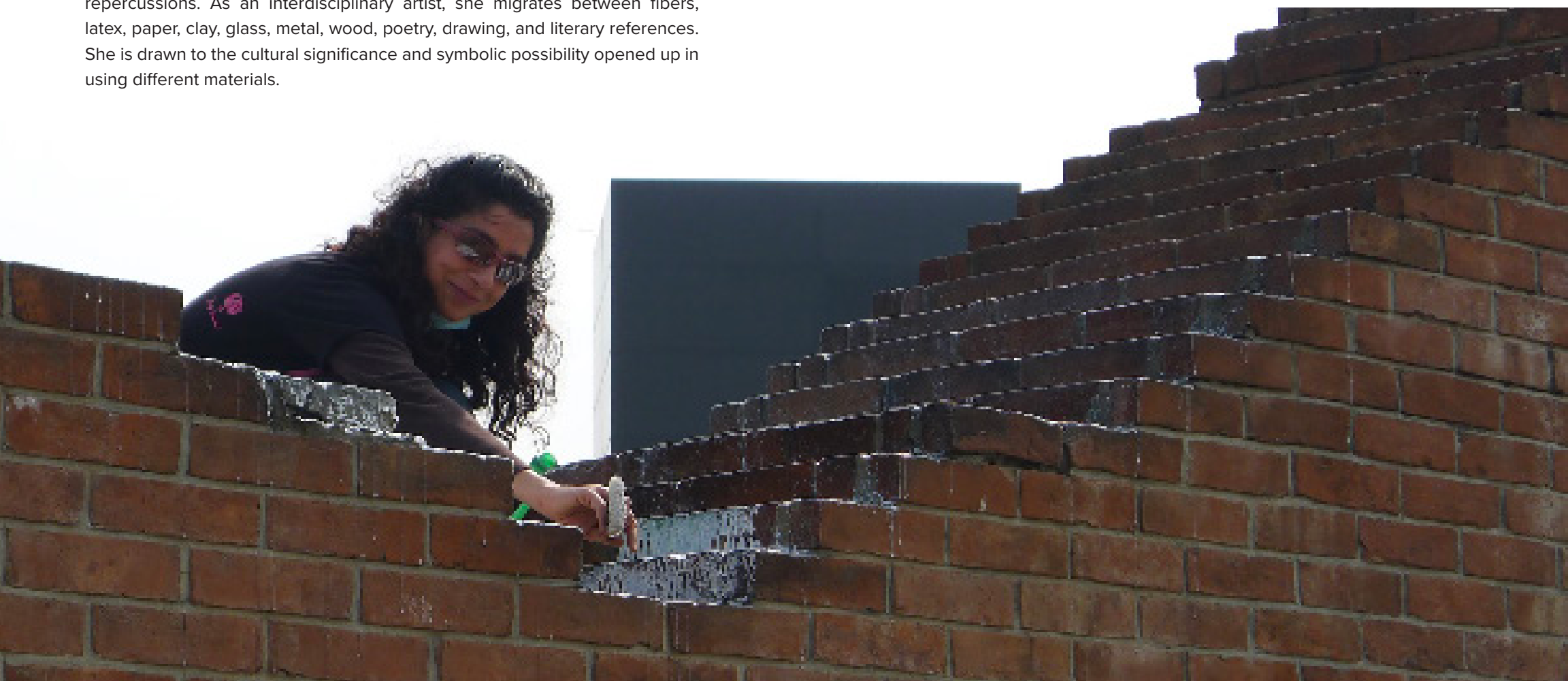
About the Artist

Pritika Chowdhry is a sociopolitical, feminist artist, who creates large-scale sculptures and site-sensitive installations that reference the body to memorialize unbearable memories. Having personally witnessed the intergenerational effects of geopolitical trauma, she has dedicated her work to cataloging the violence of colonialism/imperialism alongside global acts of resistance.

Since 2007, she has built her oeuvre through the Partition Anti-Memorial Project, a research-based project that excavates subjugated knowledge about the 1947 Partition of India and the 1971 Bangladesh Independence War to build several anti-memorials.

Her work aims to highlight historically marginalized female voices in the representation of Partition while contextualizing the event's global repercussions. As an interdisciplinary artist, she migrates between fibers, latex, paper, clay, glass, metal, wood, poetry, drawing, and literary references. She is drawn to the cultural significance and symbolic possibility opened up in using different materials.

Her anti-memorials are quietly provocative, temporary, and incorporate visceral materials and soundscapes. Although women's abduction during the partition of India in 1947 is one of the nation's most painful memories, their experiences are often excluded from discussions of Partition's impact. By locating nationhood within women that have been subject to brutal violence, her installations cut against nationalist and masculinist narratives of trauma and memory. Her goal is not to "speak for the women," rather her experiential art installations invite viewers to bear witness, holding space for mourning, remembrance, and repair.



About South Asia Institute

South Asia Institute cultivates the art and culture of South Asia and its diaspora through local and global collaborations, curated exhibitions, innovative programs and educational initiatives that aim to engage diverse communities. Artistic production by emerging and established artists is supported and cultural appreciation for the South Asian diaspora is fostered and the complexity of South Asian voices is explored, all the while staying connected with the larger human family. At South Asia Institute ethnic differences are celebrated not ignored, cultures are appreciated not misunderstood and people are uplifted through the power of the arts.

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