



# **CENTERING BORDERS IN LATIN AMERICAN AND SOUTH ASIAN CONTEXTS**

**AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF  
CULTURAL PRODUCTION**

Edited by  
Debaroti Chakraborty, Debra A. Castillo and  
Kavita Panjabi



# CENTERING BORDERS IN LATIN AMERICAN AND SOUTH ASIAN CONTEXTS

This book presents inter-disciplinary research on contemporary borders with contributions from scholars and cultural practitioners located in different contexts in the Americas and South Asia. There has been significant sociological work on borders; however there is a relative dearth of humanities research on contemporary border realities, particularly in South Asia.

This volume introduces new frameworks of critical insights and knowledge on border narratives and cultural productions. It addresses and goes beyond the impact of the partition in South Asia to train a unique comparative and aesthetic lens on borders and borderlands in relation to Latin America and the U.S.A. through oral narratives, photographs, 'objects', films, theatre, journals, and songs. It maps border perspectives and their reception in a framework of cultural politics. It revolves around themes such as violence and modes of survival; women's narratives of migration, trafficking and incarceration; abduction of children; vulnerability as experience; rationalities of mass killings; and proliferation of countercultures to map border perspectives in a framework of cultural politics.

First of its kind, the volume will be useful to scholars and researchers of comparative literary and cultural studies, South Asian studies, Latin American studies, border studies, arts and aesthetics, visual studies, sociology, comparative politics, international relations, and peace and conflict resolution studies.

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Aesthetics and Politics of Cultural Production

*Edited by Debaroti Chakraborty,  
Debra A. Castillo and Kavita Panjabi*

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Debaroti Chakraborty  
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# INTRODUCTION

*Debaroti Chakraborty, Debra A. Castillo,  
and Kavita Panjabi*

This book explores diverse cultural productions, narratives, and artistic expressions to understand how the presence of borders in people's daily lives as well as in larger political contexts shape consciousness and emotional/affective being. The complex layers of lived experiences, shaped by borders, lie embedded or are often articulated through artistic, cultural, or emotional expressions which have the capacity of activating an alternative history of borders. An understanding of these cultural resources unfolds realities that are silenced by or are in conflict with the state-sponsored politics of visibility, audibility, and representation. This volume of essays foregrounds how cultural productions stemming from experiences of borders carry the potential to facilitate a cognitive shift from perspectives of the border to border perspectives. It offers a comparative cross-cultural reading of diverse resources to enable a perspective that centres borders as a lens for understanding experiences, memories, and affective responses. It draws upon cultural resources of the borderlands and explores a variety of genres – oral narratives, photographs, 'objects', films, journals, songs, modes of humour, and others – to weave a tentative, but textured tapestry, and to map out a new framework of border perspectives. The prioritization of cultural resources in the context of experiences of borders evokes, on one hand, 'new ways of seeing' while on the other it paves the way towards a crucial debate about the aesthetics and politics of representation at the borders. The border narratives explored in this collection evokes an understanding of the aesthetic structuring of resistance, of assimilation of identities, of survival across borders, of confrontations of political and private domains, and of valorizations of the fluidity and transferability of borders. The essays in the volume come together to activate a nuanced prism relating to the experiences of borders; it is a prism that is indicative of the constitution of a new aesthetic lens to (a) look at the changing significations of contemporary borders that find representation in the newly invented forms/metaphors/themes/images informed by subjectivities of borders; and (b) understand how lived

experiences shape personal lives and consciousness which contribute to processes of history making.

How does this aesthetic lens enable access to new grounds and fresh perspectives in the engagement with border politics? Does it also point to new grounds for ethical engagement? These questions point at a discussion around the ongoing transnational threads in the context of borders and how they relate to the past – in trajectories of continuities and disruptions.

In *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text*, Emily Hicks proposed that border does not correspond to an abstract universal framed by ‘post-modern’, ‘post-contemporary’, ‘post-colonial’, ‘postindustrial’ (etc.) cultures nor do they add up to a ‘sub-culture’ or a ‘counter-culture’ that is subservient to a single dominant culture. Instead, border experiences – as reconstructed and re-enacted – emerge as potent sites of metaphors for the modern condition: in-between-ness, liminality, hybridity, bifurcated consciousness. Cultural and artistic expressions from the borders and of the borders, central to this exploration, evoke an interesting paradox: how to think about experiences rooted in the material, everyday life of the borders and their relationship to history through forms of representation that are presumably mediated and crafted?

As an outcome of the modern nation-state, borders evoke a conceptual, metaphorical, as well as material site of analysis for understanding the structures of contemporary culture, economic systems, identity, and ethnicity. Contemporary borders are not only determined by geopolitical situations but manifest themselves in complex overlaps of race, ethnicity, religion, class, and nationality. Trevor Noah, a South African comedian and writer working in the United States, says in one of his recent shows:

Mixed race people are categorized as black in America. The only catch is nobody tells you this. You have to be liked and successful first. Before that they say you are mixed. You achieve success and you get upgraded to black. All the famous mixed people do it. Singers. Like Alisha Keys...mixed...but they say ‘black’ singer. Sportsmen. Like Tiger Woods...mixed...but they say ‘black’ golfer. Most famous mixed person on the planet by far...Barrack Obama. Mixed...half and half, straight down the middle. But then they say America’s first ‘black’ President...which is interesting because when he was running they called him the mixed candidates!

(Noah, ‘Being Black in America’, YouTube)

Humour – as an artistic form – feeds on nuances of cultural borders on one hand, and on the other it helps to observe and articulate the rampant tensions in a performative idiom sanctioned by public consensus. Borders, in the materiality of their existence as well as in the conceptual domain, are

perceived as nuanced spaces of experience rather than just as strict political divides.

The larger social, geopolitical, and historical premises of contemporary borders are shaped by multiple structures – of technologies of globalization and transnationalism, of economic systems, and of identity. Contemporary policies of governance prioritize ritualistic surveillance and rigid militarization of geopolitical borders as necessary conditions of security even as these borders become more and more porous to the passage of commodities and bodies as commodities. The global map is marked by states and societies that are separated by the political divides of barbed wire fences and border security personnel, yet these border societies are simultaneously – and organically – bound by geographical contiguities such as rivers, agricultural fields and cultural continuities that defy the logic of political divides. Contemporary transnational discourses as well as international political diplomatic systems address borders and borderlands both as ambiguous spaces that can be inhabited and as realms within which abrasive histories, multiple identities, and violent exclusions are played out. The aesthetic displays of border fencing, checkpoints, and deportations symbolically enact the inviolability of the state even as the porosity of borders sanction exploitative networks that facilitate ‘illicit’ flows of migrant labourers, trafficked women and children, goods, criminals, and arms. These paradoxes create endless possibilities of cultural identity, territoriality, belonging, and dispossession. ‘Border’ as an idea thus sanctions permeability, porosity, assimilation along with its sense of division, and resilience.

The modern nation-state implicates the so-called ‘margins’, like borderlands and enclaves, for the imagination of the modern nation-state. Thereby, violence on the borderlands becomes a tool of governmentality by the modern nation-state. The relative locations of the margin and the centre and the power dynamics between them are changeable as well as transferable. Thus, the presence of the borders impacts human lives and consciousness not only in situations of border crossings or living at the borders/borderlands but also in the ways in which identities, *difference*, choices, group formations, and representations are over-determined. While, on the one hand, the border is a site of violent separation, policing, and surveillance, on the other hand, identities are constantly negotiated in, on, and through borders. Thus, in the domain of lived experiences, borders emerge as nuanced and ambiguous physical, political, and conceptual realities in relation to geopolitical location, cultural identity, state policies, and governmentality. The lived experiences of those who inhabit/encounter borders emerge as reliable ground at several levels for the study of how these experiences take on alternative physical and metaphorical significances which puncture the improvable/non-improvable, curable/non-curable, legal/illegal, non-disposable/disposable, and other such binary categories of inclusion and exclusion charted out by the modern state.



Over the last few decades, there has been an emergence of a solid body of academic scholarship and cultural resources that critique the partition of India (1947) that manifested as a political and territorial separation of groups and societies. Partition, as a historical event, has deeply influenced communal and ethnic patterns, generational dynamics, and individual life stories as well as the sense of home, memory, and identity.

It is of profound importance to question why partition continues to remain as the determining reference point even today. In conversations with a mixed class of undergraduate students who have not been affected by the partition or do not carry inherited memory of the partition, one of us – Debaroti – realized how practices of the everyday and identity formation are shaped by intergenerational ‘affect’. One of the favourite exercises with students is to create an ‘I-image’ – to talk about how ‘I’ understand myself in relation to my name, religion, class, caste, languages ‘I’ speak, where ‘I’ live, what ‘I’ like to see, hear, say, do, wear, eat, etc. Every time a chaos of multiple identities, voices, choices, sense of home, or the lack of it emerges from a class of 20 people, who are of the same age and who live in a similar geographical space. While thinking of what we ‘choose’ from our individual family histories to identify ourselves with and how we define autonomy, we arrive at an acutely hybrid condition of cultural history, linguistic inheritance, geographical location, political affinity, and other personal/political choices. Inevitably, the making of these contemporary (postcolonial?) identities are shaped by migration, displacement, inter-cultural, inter-religious, inter-caste, inter-regional relationships in a subcontinent marked by a history of porous borders. The logic of strict borders (like the partition of India) in the subcontinent of South Asia fails to represent individual identities, which, in essence, speak of the rich cultural matrix of South Asia rather than of the tight-jacketed notion of the modern nation-state.

However, while the political logic of partition has faced sharp critique when analysed against stories of human lives devastated by it, the politicization of religion continues to shape communal divides, ethnic identities, minority politics, and to propagate a hegemonic notion of the ‘other’. Even as we make efforts to engage with lived experiences and consciousness that explore the contemporary issues of borders as distinct from the logic of partition, the notion and effects of borders and policy-making emerge as being inextricably linked with that of partition. The contemporary political and social strategies of ‘managing’ borders thus lay claim to the logic of partition when it comes to making political amendments, negotiations, and renewals.

Partition and border, as linguistic signs, evoke two different concepts – while both denote a division of geographical landscape, border can also mean an edge, a limit, a space that can be occupied. Partition refers to a strict division of resources whereas, as Sophia A. McClennen posits it, ‘borders, as a result, more readily lend themselves to poetic conceptualizations

of liminality, border gnosis, and contact zones' (Mcclennen 170). So, while drawing upon the historical impact and context of partition, it is important to emerge out of the long shadow of partition and prioritize alternative ways of understanding the contemporary nature of borders.

Indian Parliamentary debates often evade questions relating to the failure of democracy in principle and in practice in the everydayness of existence in the border state. The stories of human lives reveal that it is not enough to speak the language of rights and duties, of crime and punishment, of votes and numbers, of allies and opposition; they call for attention to the fact that democracy is, first and foremost, an inter-relational philosophy that shapes the quality of human life and society. Current situations at the borders – the forms of violence, and the ways in which violations in daily life transform the aesthetics of life – all of these need to be understood in relation to the past. The inevitable affect in the context of partition was one of having to grapple with a fracture or rupture, depicted by terms like 'displacement', 'dislocation', 'trauma', 'disaster', and 'division'. The factors leading to each of these situations, mentioned before, are now being shaped by complex and changing notions of home, citizenship, belongingness, and cultural identity in this contemporary globalized world. So, there is a felt need to understand, and bring into discourse, the newer experiences of rupture that, on one hand, have connections to the history of borders while are also mapped by the changing contours of national borders and boundaries, on the other.

India has raised a fence along approximately 70 percent of India's 4,023 km border with Bangladesh. The remaining length of the border largely runs across the delta's shifting rivers, unfenced but patrolled. And while there is a 150-yard 'no-man's-land' on either side of the border, many houses can still be found that have a front door in one country and a backyard in the other.

This border was first drawn between East Pakistan and India during the partition in 1947. In 1971, when the people of East Pakistan launched and won the muktijuddha or the Liberation War against West Pakistan, they renamed their land Bangladesh in a tribute to the Bangla language and culture that formed the bedrock of their identity; this was despite the fact that they constituted a Muslim majority population, the ground on which they had been clubbed with Pakistan across the entire expanse of a Hindu majority India. This historical choice of the people of Bangladesh is often cited to prove that linguistic and cultural identity can often surpass religious identity.

Illegal migration, that has been one of the most sensitive issues between India and Bangladesh, started with the partition in 1947, and continues right into the present day, largely from Bangladesh into India but in the reverse direction too, albeit far less in number. There is no consensus whatsoever on the number of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India – they range from an estimate of a few thousands every year to 15 million in all. This

large-scale influx of Bangladeshis into India is due to various ‘push’ factors such as political upheavals, religious persecution, demographic pressures, environmental crises, and ‘pull’ factors such as employment opportunities, medical care, availability of land, and education (Datta13). On the other hand, there seem to be approximately 500,000 illegal Indian immigrants in Bangladesh, who are largely employed in jobs, and send money back home through indigenous hundi transfer systems (Financial Express).

Human rights violations are rampant in the context of human trafficking across the Indo-Bangladesh border, and this includes both sex trafficking and forced labour trafficking, but one of the problems is that Indian laws do not yet explicitly recognize and punish all forms of forced labour trafficking. It is estimated that approximately 50,000 Bangladeshi girls are trafficked to or through India every year and around 500,000 Bangladeshi women and children aged 12 to 30 years have been illegally sent to India in the last decade (Times of India). At least 50 girls and women are lured and sold across the border every day in Bangladesh, with false offers of employment or marriage without dowry, by local touts, family members, neighbours, or even ‘fake husbands’. Middlemen are usually in a nexus with law enforcement agencies on both sides.

According to some experts India has the largest problem of human trafficking, especially of minors. About 300,000 Bangladeshi minors work in the Indian red light districts of Kolkata and other cities. On the other hand, about 13,000 Bangladeshi boys and girls, some as young as five, have been trafficked in the last 5 years to destinations such as India, Pakistan, Dubai, and The United Arab Emirates with India becoming a transit point for the traffickers (Hartjen and Priyadarsini). Existing laws pertain to bonded labour or prostitution, but the scope of trafficking is much wider and there are no provisions in law as yet for the prevention of trafficking, or the protection and rehabilitation of victims. While girls are often rescued under the sex trafficking laws, and rehabilitated or repatriated, trafficked boys usually end up facing criminalization:

Caught between a rock and a hard place are the unfortunate young adolescents who are unlucky enough to fall foul of the local police or border security forces within Indian territory or while crossing the border. Booked as criminals under the same laws that punish illegal adult migrants to India, they are incarcerated in shelter homes, and in the absence of bilateral agreements on their repatriation and/or rehabilitation, remain there indefinitely, unwanted by one country, and unclaimed by the other.

(Basu)

In 2016, a draft was of the Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection, and Rehabilitation) Bill that was referred to as India’s first ever anti human

trafficking law. Significantly, the Bill aims ‘to treat survivors of trafficking as victims in need of assistance and to make rehabilitation a right for those who are rescued’, but it has been inordinately delayed. In the meanwhile, the Covid pandemic has aggravated matters especially in relation to the trafficking of children:

Children make up almost a third of all human trafficking victims worldwide, with the situation being more disturbing in India for children. According to the NCRB 2018 data, 51% of all trafficking victims were children, of which more than 80% were girls. The COVID 19 pandemic has further led to an increase in a number of children who are more susceptible to trafficking. The recently orphaned children in India, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, also run the increased risk of trafficking in the garb of adoption, employment or livelihood and shelter.

(Bhaskar)

In July 2021, the Bill has been put into the public domain yet again for debate<sup>1</sup> and it is hoped that finally there will be laws to address the dire violations and abuse of children and others in fields of forced labour too.

There still remains the question of voluntary migration across the borders of unequal states in search of livelihoods, and as Datta succinctly puts it, ‘Border control and migration projects both require further discussion to unlock the polarities in the debate between right to mobility and countering the human trafficking crime’ (Datta 22).

Migration across the border is not new. In the sixties and seventies, poor families from Jessore and Satkhira begged their way to domestic jobs and bars and brothels in big cities – Calcutta, Bombay, etc. and were also taken as far away as Saudi Arabia. Bar work, which became widely available after 1990, often entailed sex work but not always. There were ‘contract marriages’ whereby men married women for the purpose of trafficking them to Mumbai. This posed a threat to the very fabric of society. Migration of unskilled women’s labour to the Middle East is another area of concern. It happens under severely exploitative conditions as it is illegal. As the existing ban does not prevent women from migrating nor protect their rights, there are demands for lifting the ban. There is a need for recognition of women’s migration as a fact and as a right (Blanchet iv).

Patrolling against all illicit activity on the Bangladesh border, India has the world’s largest border guarding force, the Border Security Force (BSF). According to the National Academy of Pre-recruitment Training, ‘The BSF has grown exponentially from a few battalions in 1965, to 186 battalions with a sanctioned strength of 257,363 personnel including an expanding air wing, marine wing, artillery regiments, and commando units’. Investigative reports have made recommendations against the immunity the BSF enjoys

(Datta). The number of Bangladeshis killed or injured every year by the BSF is aggravated by the number of Bangla speaking borderlanders now being pushed into Bangladesh as illegal immigrants under the purview of the National Register of Citizens. This has led to increasing human rights violations on the border, and to growing concern in Bangladesh. Odhikar, a Bangladeshi Human Rights organization, reports in Forum Asia:

According to information gathered by Odhikar, from 2009 to 2019, a total of 455 Bangladeshi citizens were killed by the Indian Border Security Force. Furthermore, 657 Bangladeshis were injured and 518 Bangladeshis were allegedly abducted by BSF during this period. In 2019 alone, 41 Bangladeshis were reportedly killed by the BSF.... Apart from this, the Government of India has already started pushing Bangla-speaking Indian nationals into Bangladesh, who have recently been excluded from the National Register of Citizens (NRC) [and] made to identify illegal immigrants in India, which is a matter of grave concern. [Parenthesis mine].

While the NRC has been understood in terms of the targeting of Bangladeshis, the enactment of the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in December 2019 has further heightened the political tension on both sides of the border. This law provides a fast track to citizenship for non-Muslims from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan who faced religious persecution and entered India before 31 December 2014 (Dasgupta). It has been met with widespread protest in India too as a majoritarian Hindu move discriminating against Muslim populations in South Asia.

On the other hand, the Rohingya refugee crisis too has become a bone of contention between India and Bangladesh, none of whom have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention that spells out refugee rights and makes it a responsibility of the camp country to protect them. The Rohingyas have been fleeing persecution in Myanmar for several years, but the military crackdown in 2017–2018 led to a massive exodus. Citing internal pressures and security concerns, such as the appropriation of a vulnerable Rohingya population by jihadi groups at the border, India refused to take direct responsibility for the devastated refugees, but offered to extend support to Bangladesh:

Refusing to bow under international pressure over Rohingya crisis, India made it clear that it would not compromise with the security concerns of the country. However, the government decided to extend help to Bangladesh in providing all amenities to the fleeing Rohingyas, who are being relocated in camps there. India also asked Myanmar to end persecution of Rohingyas.

(Datta)

By March 2021, after the latest spate of exodus, Bangladesh was estimated to have up to 5 lakh Rohingya refugees. It set up a massive refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, where the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has issued ID cards to Rohingya refugees in an attempt to minimize their human rights abuse. Bangladesh too is now facing pressure from within to ease the Rohingya refugee situation. It recently moved thousands of Rohingya refugees to a new and remote island called Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh is reluctant to take back Rohingya survivors who leave the country's shores for refuge in other countries like Malaysia; on the other hand, India has been cautious about accepting Rohingya refugees due to its own domestic compulsions (Datta). This leaves the Rohingya refugees, one of the most traumatized populations in the world today, literally nowhere.

Though the histories of borders in South Asia are distinctively different from those in Latin America, the border functions in similar patterns in these contexts in the way human lives are organized around it. The partition of India gave rise to a history of separation of land, of people, of lives and loyalties, of the communal 'othering' of Hindus by Pakistan, and of Muslims by India. While the Pakistani and Bangladeshi fear of dominance by the economically stronger India continues unabated, the Indian 'fear' of Bangladeshi Muslims infiltrating India for better economic prospects has been blown into monumental proportion. Yet Indians and Pakistanis on the western front of India and Indians and Bangladeshis across its eastern borders remain connected, across these manufactured divides of state and religion, through contiguities of language and culture. The U.S.–Mexico border too is steeped in a history of territorial acquisition, of the economic dominance of Mexico by the United States, and of the U.S. 'fear' of infiltration by the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural other. The Mexican American War (1836–1848) enabled the United States to acquire vast tracts of land, intensifying the uneven economic relations across borders on one hand and creating complicated racial divides on the other. Debra Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Cordoba, in the book *Border Women: Writing from La Frontera*, posit the ambivalence of the northern Mexican border – from one side it serves as definitive barrier and from the other as an inconsequential (immaterial, metaphorical) line. The equivocal nature of the border becomes pronounced in the individual's interaction with the border as an abstract space or as a divisive line during border crossings. The lived experiences of the border, that evoke registers of absurdity and unevenness, give birth to powerful contemporary theories that attempt to explain modern socio-cultural phenomena in the context of borders. Cristina Rivera Garza, the winner of a 2020 MacArthur 'genius' award, writes movingly about her own family history on both sides of the border in her *Autobiografía del algodón*, in which she describes the interlocked history of her family in northern Mexico and Texas, as labour migration, immigration, deportation,

and more immigration lead to her, a Mexican citizen, being offered an academic position in Houston, a city her father helped build.

So there has been a network of theoretical postulations on borders, including Rolando J. Romero's comment that 'Very few places have been subjected to as much verbal abuse as at the border between the United States and Mexico' (Romero 36) and Etienne Balibar's understanding that borders do not work in the same way, and people bring different baggage with them when they cross (Castillo and Tabuenca 1–2). For instance, the U.S.–Mexico border produces a set of general categories like the *pollo* (the undocumented border crosser), the *migra* (the U.S. immigration officer), the *coyote* (the person who brings the pollo across the border), and the *turista* (the North American visitor to Mexico).

Ongoing violence in Central America (several countries in the region have sadly been in the list of the ten most violent countries in the world for years) and the increasing prevalence of ecological disasters propelled by human-caused climate change have only exacerbated the problem. The end of the second decade of the 21st century was marked by successive waves of immigration and increasingly harsh U.S. official response. The unaccompanied minor influx of 2013–2014 (a 90% increase over previous years), prompted the Obama administration to limit the grounds for asylum and to fast-track removal proceedings, a process movingly documented in Valeria Luiselli's 2017 *Tell me how it ends: An essay in 40 questions* and her 2019 novel, *Lost Children Archive*.

Since 2018, Central Americans have been banding together in large caravans to mitigate the dangers in the long route through Mexico to the United States, which has been plagued by criminal violence. President Trump responded with a suite of punitive measures, including increased enforcement to prevent people from crossing the border to ask for asylum, leading to large migrant camps in Mexican border cities like Tijuana; his 'zero tolerance policy' that led to the infamous family separation in 2018 that took thousands of parents and children, some of them mere infants, into separate custody with no plans for reuniting them – and indeed, no solid trail of paperwork that would allow reunification. Trump also instated the so-called 'Migrant Protection Protocols' or 'remain in Mexico' policy that required asylum seekers to return to Mexico while their cases were proceeding in court (this policy was ended by Biden in January 2021, and his decision upheld by the Supreme Court). Together with increasingly stringent restrictions on who can ask for asylum and on what grounds, Trump famously – and in contravention of international law – effectively instated a death to asylum policy. It is worth noting that in the current climate, domestic abuse, gang violence, and climate disasters are not legal grounds for requesting asylum. Along with these restrictions, Trump convinced the three most dangerous countries in Central America, to sign 'safe third country' agreements, so that migrants would legally have to ask for asylum there, rather than in



the United States (Mexico resisted pressure to also sign such an agreement). Among the very few ‘caravaneros’ to succeed in his asylum claim under the Trump regulations is Douglas Oviedo, a Honduran activist and youth pastor whose story was first documented on the website ‘Humanizando la deportación’. Oviedo later wrote a longer story of the collective experience in his 2020 testimonial play, *Caravaneros*.

Immigration remains a hotly debated issue in the United States, with Joe Biden and Kamala Harris quietly retaining many of Trump’s restrictions, while speaking compassionately about the need for immigration reform and a path to citizenship for long-term immigrants already in the United States. New caravans were forming in Spring 2021, but in June 2021, Harris, in her first international visit, gave her infamous ‘do not come’ speech, alongside Guatemalan president Alejandro Giammattei.

The latter half of the 20th century, from around the 1980s, the India–Bangladesh border witnessed incoherent economic reforms veering towards neoliberalism on one hand and intensifying economic deprivation of the poor sections on the other; this period was also marked by transforming cross-border dynamics that brought issues of de-territorialization, illegal passage of human beings and commodities, and the influx of refugees to the centre of political systems (Keller 15–19). The recent re-configurations in economic and political systems had a remarkable impact on the history and nature of borders. In the essay ‘India in the 1980s and 1990s: A Triumph of Reforms’, Arvind Panagariya cites a seminal work of Economic historian J. Bradford DeLong which claims that the sources of India’s recent acceleration in economic growth may be traced back to the early or mid-1980s, before the exchange crisis of 1991 and the shift of the government of Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh towards neoliberal economic reforms (Panagariya 3). Singh, in his historic 1991 budget speech, drew a close connection between his proposals and the policies initiated by India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and carried forward by his grandson Rajiv Gandhi. The neoliberal policies charted out in 1991 brought about expansion of service sectors and catapulted a liberalized investment and trade regime. The political enactment of border strategies, collaborated by liberalizing economic reforms, had a telling effect on the way borders began to control human lives and traffic. This also marks a shift in the understanding of contemporary border relations in South Asia as distinct from that of partition and its effects. Likewise, the Southern Common Market, or MERCOSUR, was established by treaty among Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay in 1991, later adding other members from the western hemisphere. In a similar neoliberal move, the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, was put into effect on 1 January 1994, seeking to deepen economic ties among the United States, Mexico, and Canada. In response, The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), an indigenous group in Mexico, staged an armed uprising in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas to protest NAFTA



and the Mexican government's endorsement of neoliberalism at the expense of the poor majority among its own citizen. Thus, contemporary borders need to be situated within the relations of power and economy that map the world today, to understand the forms of politicization. The cross-readings of South Asian and Latin American border narratives within a comparative framework may enable richer and more varied understandings of the echoes and resonances between border cultures.

This collection develops a prism to cull insights about border realities from a wide range of cultural resources including oral narratives, cinema, documentaries, objects and media, and performance. As a multi-generic and multi-textual volume, it posits the persistent challenge of locating a cohesive premise that can deal with the structural and aesthetic complexity of diverse cultural productions. However, this volume seeks to foreground the potential of the embedded polyphony in diverse cultural productions that represent border lives and realities.

The multiple ways in which an event/situation at the borders impact lives often prompt varied forms of human behaviour and responses and shape the aesthetics of lives as well as the narration of those events. An experience of the present may be filtered through a memory of the past as well as a consciousness of the present. Now how these experiences are articulated in a cultural/artistic expression also relates to the question of mediation, of an ethical, political, and aesthetic choice. This volume encourages readers to look at these diverse materials through a new aesthetic lens that can enable an understanding of the modes of revisiting the past, of relating situations of the present with the past, of exploring how the past is performed in artistic/creative expressions.

The aesthetics of creatively transforming experiences lies not just in stating or recording events but in elaborating them, in interpreting them, in revisiting them, and in re-enacting them. These processes of conscious or intuitive mediation could be referred to as poetic structuring of truth. One can make meaning of how events/experiences are filtered through memory, human behaviour, language, images, objects, and performance through a close attention to these processes of articulation. Memory, in the process of cultural productions, is thus understood not just as a repository of information but rather as a realm characterized by an ongoing process of reconstruction and elaboration of meaning (Portelli). Forgetting is an essential function of memory while cultural productions may bring back either what is forgotten because it has no meaning to the present consciousness or a traumatic memory, which is not bearable or cannot be articulated in the present state of consciousness. So even the slippages and silences in memory, as surfaced in artistic forms, can evoke meaning in terms of the impact of an event in the inner consciousness of one situated within a specific history. For instance, a seemingly unrelated incident in the present may trigger a memory of the past, which had remained deeply embedded in the collective

psyche and has the capacity to influence one's interpretation and narration of a present-day experience. The intent of creative expressions thus often goes beyond the immediate, the historical, the factual in re-staging how past events or experiences as well as contemporary conditions of living shape consciousness and modes of relating to the world around. A reading of cultural resources, thus, allows an alternative entry point – an understanding of the layers of interiority and how the imprints of interiority of consciousness informed by experiences of the border are processed and creatively represented. An understanding of the multi-toned quality of diverse cultural productions may help point at the complex nature of truth as processed in an individual's experiences at the border.

'Truth(s?)', as experienced and articulated, is/are shaped by ways of living, specific histories, experiences, and sensory perceptions. They are embedded and embodied in the processes of artistic productions such that they burst the boundaries of materiality and empirical truth. The close readings of the diverse material also presuppose the ethics of reading varied aesthetic modes of representation. The ethics of reading brings to the core questions of what is central in an artistic reproduction, of the politics of understanding the 'truth' of cultural productions. Each aesthetic form uses its own language to make meaning of a particular experience/story/theme. So the ethics of approaching each artistic form is to underline the potential of and to observe the processes of that particular form in the artistic structuring of an event as perceived, absorbed, and recalled. This marks a shift in the understanding of 'truth' – of articulations that are accepted as valid based on not only what is narrated, but why and how something is narrated in a particular way rather than on its factual accuracy – comprises the ethics of approaching diverse cultural resources.

Artistic expressions help foreground that realm of consciousness where events are received, experienced, and aesthetically processed in ways that are capable of mobilizing future possibilities. This politics of reading cultural productions also emphasize a prioritization of poetic 'truth' which is different from factual 'truth'. It involves an understanding of the processes through which material events are processed in an individual's layers of consciousness, of how facts are transformed into value, of how these expressions have the potential to shape culture and history in ways that factual truth may not (Panjabi 19). The indeterminate zone between fact and poetic truth is foregrounded in the re-enactment of experiences such that the truth lies embedded in how they are told, in which specific circumstances they are told and in understanding why one chooses to express them in the particular creative form – how does a particular form enable the representation of personal experiences, feeling of nostalgia, loss, fear, longing, in-between-ness modes of making meaning and history that cannot be accessed through other forms.

Maruška Svašek employs the terms transit, transition, and transformation to understand the emotional significance embedded in objects in the

processes of cultural and material production in an interconnected world. The framework of transit, transition, and transformation makes connection between two types of ‘movement’ – first mobility through time and space and secondly ‘emotional dynamics’. The first type of movement, she explains, has spatial dimensions that are intrinsic to ‘being-in-and-thus-moving-through-the-world’ while the second type signifies a traffic between geographical space, social dimension, and affect. She writes:

Ideas of emotivity also differ widely from one society to the next and in some societies a concept of emotion as would most commonly be understood by the term ‘emotions’ in English, is entirely absent (Lutz, 1988, Wierzbicka, 2004). In other words, emotional processes are at least culturally constituted, informed by situated social practices.

(Svašek 8)

Emotional dynamics, as analysed above, seeks a renewed approach that pushes the boundaries of emotions understood either as physical processes or as cultural constructions. They appeal as an important component of subjectivity, subject–object relationships, and aesthetics responses that lie at the core of cultural productions. The aesthetics of cultural productions, explored in this volume, focuses on how experiences situated in border cultures and realities can have a strong emotional imprint and a representative and performative dimension. Here re-enactment as a form in various modes brings attention to ‘embodied experience’ shaped primarily by two kinds of engagement. On one hand it builds upon aspects of emotional experiences, subjectivity, and sensory perceptions that relate to the intuitive and impulsive tendencies, while on the other it relies on the craft of interpretation and representation guided by aesthetic choice and the intellect.

The representative forms stemming from borders prioritize the potential intensity of human experiences at the borders; they foreground ‘affect’ that is shaped by experiential and relational encounters between people in conditions of ambiguous and multiple realities of borders. However, a focus on aesthetics in this context does not seek to eulogize borders as spaces of assimilation of cultures and practices, to separate articulations from realities in the appreciation of artistic processes or to draw attention to borders as sites of metaphors in contemporary discourses. Rather, it explores subjectivity as a prism to analyse how borders affect people’s lives, practices, and their relation to history. It is important to bring home the validity of affect in understanding an alternative history of borders since it relates to the impact of events in the intimate, private, and public life and in recognizing ‘in-between-ness’ as a state of being, i.e. a state of consciousness rather than a transitional passage in the context of present-day borders and migration.