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# Spaces of Refusal: Rethinking Sovereign Power and Resistance at the Border

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This article investigates local actions that transgress, subvert, and ignore the imposition of sovereign authority at the borders of sovereign states. It describes the creation and gradual securitization of the 4,096-km border between India and Bangladesh, which has culminated with the construction of roads, floodlights, and fences on the majority of the previously open and lightly guarded border. Then, by drawing on interviews with borderland residents, it analyzes the ways that people interact with, talk about, and cross the border in their daily lives. The motives and consequences of these cross-border connections are not precisely captured by the literature on sovereign power and the state of exception, which identifies very little space for resistance, or the literature on dominance–resistance in power relations, which understands most actions as political resistance in a broad milieu of power. To reconcile these conflicting views on resistance, this article proposes spaces of refusal to understand a range of activities that are not overt political resistance but nevertheless refuse to abide by the binary framing of state territorial and identity categories. *Key Words:* borders, power, resistance, South Asia, sovereignty.

本文调查了发生在主权国家边界的，逾越，颠覆，和忽视主权利力征收的地方行动。它描述了印度和孟加拉国之间 4096 公里边界的形成和逐渐的安全化，在此过程中，道路泛光灯，和围栏的建设在以前开放的和被简单守卫的大部分边境达到了高潮。然后，通过借鉴对边疆居民的采访，本文分析人们互动，交谈，并在日常生活中跨越边界的方法。这些跨境连接的动机和后果既没有精确地被有关主权和权力异常状态的，识别非常小的阻力空间的文章所捕捉，也没被关于权力关系中抗主导地位的，把多数行动理解为广泛的权力环境中的政治阻力的文字所概括。为了调和对这些阻力的矛盾观点，本文提出了拒绝的空间来了解一系列活动，这些活动不是公开的政治阻力，但它们拒绝遵守国家领土和身份类别的二进制框架。关键词：边境，权力，阻力，南亚，主权。

Este artículo investiga acciones locales que transgreden, subvierten e ignoran las imposiciones de la autoridad soberana en las fronteras de los estados soberanos. Describe la creación y segurización gradual de los 4,096 km de frontera entre India y Bangladesh, que ha culminado con la construcción de carreteras, luces de alerta de inundaciones, y cercas en la mayor parte de la frontera anteriormente abierta y poco resguardada. Entonces, mediante entrevistas a los residentes de la frontera se analiza las formas de interacción de la gente, de lo que hablan acerca de la frontera y como la cruzan en su vida diaria. Los motivos y consecuencias de las conexiones de estos cruces de frontera no son captados con precisión por la literatura sobre poder soberano y estado de excepción, que identifica muy poco espacio para la resistencia, o la literatura en dominancia-resistencia en las relaciones de poder, las cuales entienden la mayoría de las acciones como resistencia política en un ambiente amplio de poder. Para reconciliar estos puntos de vista conflictivos acerca de la resistencia, este artículo propone espacios de rechazo para entender el rango de actividades que no muestran una resistencia política abierta pero que, sin embargo, se resisten a aceptar el marco binario de territorio estatal y categorías de identidad. *Palabras clave:* fronteras, poder, resistencia, Sur de Asia, soberaneidad.

Moushumi, a servant in a wealthy Bangladeshi family's home, set out for India in the late afternoon to visit her son.<sup>1</sup> She packed a small bag with a change of clothes and two *shingara*, which are Bengali-style samosas, more rounded than angular, with a savory potato filling. She met her "uncle," the broker, outside his house and gave him 200 Bangladeshi taka, about US\$3. Six other travelers arrived as they waited for darkness to fall. She dozed on the floor and ate a *shingara*. A few hours later they walked to the edge of

the river, hopped in a small boat, and floated for a few minutes—definitely less than ten—until the boatman pulled the boat back to the bank of the river. The travelers got out and climbed onto a waiting flatbed rickshaw for the ride into a nearby Indian village. She rested at a relative's house that night and then continued her journey to her son's house the next morning. She stayed for about a month, cooking for her son and playing with her grandchildren, then made the return trip to the Indian village near the border. She paid the Indian broker, this

time in rupees, waited for nightfall, and got back in the same boat. The return trip took slightly longer because it was against the current, but she was back at the broker's house in Bangladesh by midnight. She set out early the next morning and was back to work at the wealthy family's house by noon. She never saw any border guards, or even the new border fence, but it was certainly there somewhere in the darkness on the banks of the river. The only difference from previous trips to visit her son was the extra cost of paying the brokers, but she enjoyed the ride in the boat, which was more pleasant than just walking across the border, as she had always done before.

How should theorists of state sovereignty, transnationalism, and resistance conceptualize the experiences of Moushumi—and thousands of other people like her—who, when faced with what they perceive to be a cumbersome and arbitrary rule of the state, refuse to submit to the imposed territorial order and instead continue to live their normal lives? Is she merely a sixty-year-old woman who decided to make the short trip to visit her son and grandson without regard for its political implications? Prior to 1947, it would have been an unremarkable trip within a single colonial space. Even for many years after 1947, when the new sovereign states officially drew a line between her village and her son's, movement continued without much intervention from the authorities. Or should she be considered a criminal because she violated the laws of both India and Bangladesh? Is she merely a poor, illiterate woman who does not understand the concept of state sovereignty, or is she part of the resistance that contests the borders that divide the world into territorially defined sovereign states? Should we interpret these everyday transgressions, when people simply ignore a distant rule that does not seem to apply to them, as acts of defiant resistance? Do these movements threaten the authority of the state? Or is it a minor flow that can be allowed across a leaky border?

Neither the literature on sovereign power and the state of exception nor the literature on dominance and resistance in power relations precisely captures the motives and consequences of Moushumi's trip. The burgeoning literature on the state of exception identifies very little space for resistance (Agamben 1998, 2005; Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004; Minca 2007). In this framework, the expansion of the state system around the world has resulted in an all-encompassing, unitary, and increasingly globalized sovereign power (Dillon 2004). The sovereign gains authority not simply by establishing and enforcing laws in a territory but specifically

through the deployment of the state of exception, a time and space where others must follow laws but the sovereign can operate outside the legal system if it perceives a threat to its authority (Agamben 1998, 2005). Edkins and Pin-Fat (2004) argued that this theorization of sovereign power precludes meaningful resistance because any perceived threat can be neutralized through the use of the exception, a time and space where power relations are replaced by violence relations. In this frightening scenario, the political citizen with rights protected by laws is evanescent and, as Edkins and Pin-Fat (2004, 9) put it, "[w]e have all become *homines sacri* or bare life in the face of a biopolitics that technologizes, administers, and depoliticizes, and thereby renders the political and power relations irrelevant." In this view, Moushumi's trip would not be resistance at all but rather an activity that is currently allowed and monitored by the border guards but one that could quickly be violently suppressed if necessary.

Whereas the state of exception literature finds little space for resistance, the literature on dominance–resistance in power relations sees virtually every action within the framework of power (Scott 1985; Sharp et al. 2000). Power often appears pervasive where every action is political and is made by either a dominating or resisting agent in a broad milieu of power relations (Rose 2002). The most well-known example is Scott's (1985) argument that even when full-fledged revolution is impossible, people continued to use all of the avenues available to them to resist undesired changes to their lives:

Foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on. . . . They require little or no coordination or planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; they often represent a form of individual self-help; they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority. (xvi)

In Scott's formulation almost any type of noncompliance is resistance. His point is that simply refusing to go along with a new regime of land ownership or resource management represented a dismissal of the imposed order and a way of continuing to practice alternative ways of living. In geography, Sharp et al. (2000, 3) proposed an equally capacious definition of resistance as any activity that "attempts to set up situations, groupings, and actions which resist the impositions of dominating power," which can range from "breaking wind when the king goes by" to "violent actions" with transformative goals. In the dominance–resistance

framework, Moushumi's trip would certainly be an example of resistance to the authority of the state.

To reconcile these literatures with starkly different views of power and resistance, this article makes three arguments about the state, sovereignty, and cross-border movement. First, it demonstrates that scholars of the state of exception profoundly overestimate the extent and homogeneity of state authority. Rather than understanding sovereign power as unitary and all-encompassing, it is better conceptualized as multifaceted, partial, and conflicted (Jones 2009a). Despite the expansion of the sovereign state over the past century, there are many loosely administered places where the authority of the state is weak or nonexistent. Exceptional violence is periodically materialized but is not pervasive as the term *state of exception* implies. Even at the border, where the performances of sovereign authority are often the most conspicuous, the territorial control of sovereign power is incomplete. Indeed, the overt performances and the need for exceptional violence are indicative of its weakness, which would be unnecessary if it had firm control. The second and third sections of this article demonstrate this claim by examining the literature on state-making in marginal areas, by describing the fitful expansion of the Bangladeshi and Indian states at the border, and by analyzing the current practices of border guards. These officials—whom Butler (2004, 56) called the “petty sovereigns” of governmentality—are delegated the authority to make the decision on the exception for the sovereign; however, at the India–Bangladesh border, they use this authority to allow themselves to operate outside the laws of the state, often undermining the state's goals of regulation, legibility, and order.

Second, this article questions the dominance–resistance binary that defines all activities as being political. Instead it looks for alternative ways to understand a variety of actions that are more concerned with simply getting by or avoiding adverse changes in daily life. If everything is understood as part of the interplay of dominance and resistance in power relations, the analysis becomes increasingly meaningless because it fails to consider whether the resistance actually produces any changes to the power relationship or whether it was even intentional, a decision often left to the researcher, not the individual (Pile and Keith 1997; Rose 2002; Sparke 2008). Katz (2004) proposed an alternative framework that distinguishes between full-fledged resistance—active contestation that attempts to produce emancipatory change—and other quotidian activities that are in relation to power but not overtly

contesting it, which she classified as reworking and resilience in power relations (Sparke 2008). Reworking refers to actions that alter the organization but not the polarization of power relations. When power relations are reworked, some aspects are improved but the overall situation remains unchanged as the individuals and institutions with authority retain it. Katz used a third category of resilience to understand actions that enable people to survive without really changing the circumstances that make survival so hard. The fourth section of this article analyzes theories of resistance and argues for a more nuanced approach to contesting power in both the state of exception and dominance–resistance literatures that emphasizes the process of “enframing” through which the categories and boundaries of sovereign power are instituted (T. Mitchell 1990).

Finally, this article proposes the alternative of *spaces of refusal* to conceptualize everyday actions like Moushumi's that disregard the rules of the state in these not completely administered spaces but are not politically motivated resistance to sovereignty. A space of refusal is a zone of contact where sovereign state practices interact with alternative ways of seeing, knowing, and being. In those spaces, people adopt various means for avoiding the sovereignty regime of the state, even when the traditional response of flight is not available (Agnew 2005; Scott 2009). These include evading the state apparatus by not paying taxes, transgressing the state's authority by engaging in activities that are prohibited by the state, and refusing to accept the lines and categories drawn by the state to create and practice its power (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004). Spaces of refusal are not zones where there is a revolution against the state, nor are they spaces of romanticized resistance. Instead, they are characterized by a simple dismissal of the state's claim to define subjects and activities in those spaces (Sharp et al. 2000; Sparke 2008). The fifth section of this article demonstrates how the residents have developed a multitude of strategies that acquiesce to, co-opt, transgress, and ignore both the sovereignty of the state and the violence regime of the border guards. By refusing to accept the binary framing of the state that attempts to create a world of us–them, here–there, and dominance–resistance, Moushumi and many other people maintain imaginative geographies outside state-sanctioned categories of identity and territory (T. Mitchell 1990; Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004). These acts of refusal disrupt the ordering logic on which the state relies and maintain the possibility that different frameworks outside sovereign state

territoriality could be created, even though those alternatives are not being pursued yet.

## Creating State Spaces and Subjects

The sovereign state system is based on the idea that the entire territory of the world is divided into separate spaces, which have distinct sovereign governments that make and enforce laws in those territories (Agnew and Corbridge 1995; Murphy 1996, 2005). The idea of bounded, territorially defined sovereignty was institutionalized in Europe in the modern era and spread through the world via colonization. In terms of state control of territory, Scott (2009) argues that human history can be divided into four very simplified eras:

1) a stateless era (by far the longest), 2) an era of small-scale states encircled by vast and easily reached stateless peripheries, 3) a period in which such peripheries are shrunken and beleaguered by the expansion of state power, and finally, 4) an era in which virtually the entire globe is “administered space” and the periphery is not much more than a folkloric remnant. (324)

By tracing the ebb and flow of state-making in Southeast Asia, Scott (2009) argued that the peripheries at the edges of the expanding states were not barbaric places that had never experienced organized society. Instead, he demonstrated that these upland areas were populated by people who had fled the rule of the state due to slavery, conscription, or land cooptation. The spaces outside the state’s authority were zones of escape where

This pattern of state-making and state-unmaking produced, over time, a periphery that was composed as much of refugees as of people who had never been state subjects. . . . [They went] there to evade the manifold afflictions of state-making projects in the valleys. Far from being “left behind” by the progress of civilization in the valleys, they have, over long periods of time, chosen to place themselves out of reach of the state. (Scott 2009, 7, 24)

Scott’s story disputes traditional histories of state making, at least as told by the historians of the state, which ignore the possibility of desirable statelessness and instead always describe the other on the outside as barbaric, uncivilized, and in need of incorporation into the state.

Scott (2009) also questioned the claim that states have always controlled large territories for most of written history. He contended instead that “To an eye not yet hypnotized by archeological remains and state-

centric histories, the landscape would have seemed virtually all periphery and no centers. Nearly all the population and territory were outside their ambit” (5). His book on stateless spaces reads like an elegy, however, because he concluded that these peripheral spaces outside the sovereign state system are almost completely gone today. He suggested that since the 1950s the deployment of technologies that produce time–space compression allowed marginal spaces to be incorporated into the state.

This article demonstrates that such is not quite the case. Undoubtedly, sovereign states now claim that all of the territory of the world and state administration has reached even the most remote places that had previously served as zones of escape from the state. In this sense, the refuges of completely unadministered space that Scott (2009) described are mostly gone today. Despite maps that indicate the contrary, however, many places remain that are only loosely under the authority of the state. Although a state might make the claim of absolute control and be present in most spaces to some degree, some people’s lives are only partially affected by it.

Contemporary political maps represent the land of the world as homogenous territories with sharp divisions between them, but the vast majority of the world’s population did not live in an independent sovereign state until very recently, after the period of decolonization that followed World War II. For most places and people in the world, the notion of territorial sovereignty is not old and essential but rather new and not wholly familiar. In most cases, the colonial powers demolished the previous political systems and replaced them with colonial governments in territories defined by European imperial claims, not historical linguistic, cultural, economic, or political systems. At the time of decolonization, the only viable option was to maintain the borders of the European colonies as the borders of the new sovereign states. Previous political systems had been dismantled, and redrawing borders based on language or ethnicity would be messy and contentious.

In the few cases when borders were redrawn, as with the borders that divide contemporary South Asia near Moushumi’s house, economic or cultural patterns of connection and circulation were rarely considered. Instead, British India was partitioned based on the notion that the categories Hindu and Muslim defined the “nations” of South Asia and each should have its own sovereign state (Chatterji 1994, 2007). In the former province of Bengal, the history of syncretistic and blurred religious practices was ignored (Roy 1984). The

economic circuits between jute farms in rural eastern Bengal and the mills and port of Calcutta were not considered. The linguistic and cultural similarities that would exist across the new border were elided. Instead, a line was drawn on a map straight through the former province of Bengal.

And yet even that supreme act of division produced as many connections as discontinuities. On the one hand, millions of people did eventually move across the new line to join the country of their coreligionists (Chatterji 2007). In Bengal, the movement was much slower than the rapid rush on the western border between India and Pakistan. People found new homes across the border over the next thirty years, a process that sorted out the population along religious lines in ways that had never before existed, partially bringing the imagined religious divisions into being. On the other hand, large minority populations of 25 percent Muslim in West Bengal and 11 percent Hindu in Bangladesh remain. In an interview, a sixty-four-year-old politician in India explains these connections:

The people here came from there and the people there came from here, so there is that connection. Those people who live near the border have a cordial relationship. They are invited over to our houses; we are invited to their houses. So in terms of this, the relationship is very good. There is not any bad in it.

These movements across the border also had the effect of linking families, like Moushumi's and most families in Bengal, to both countries on both sides of the border (Ghosh 2002).

In the years after partition, the two states slowly and unevenly imposed their sovereignty in the borderlands (Van Schendel 2005). The sovereign authority of the state did not immediately come into being in 1947 with the drawing of a map or in 1952 with the marking and surveying of the border or in the 1960s with the creation of border security forces. In practice, despite these attempts to bring the border into being, the borderlands functioned as they had before, with people crossing without consequence for many decades after partition. With extended families in both countries, many people made trips to visit relatives on the other side. People would also cross the border to go to work, attend festivals, participate in weddings, and even simply to go to the market. The different regulatory and monetary systems on either side of the border also created new economic connections through smuggling networks that solidified business relationships. A forty-

seven-year-old teacher in Bangladesh explains how the border operated in the years after partition:

My father and grandfather would tell us stories about going to the doctor in the Hindu village across the border and the BDR [Bangladesh Rifles] and BSF [Indian Border Security Force] would not say anything. They did not even bother to come near them. At that time, that was the normal situation.

This freedom of movement could not last forever. The expansion of the sovereign state system has occurred with a simultaneous creation of sedentary populations that farm the land, provide bodies for conscription, and provide locatable resources for taxation (Scott 2009).

People who move disrupt the clean, territorially based identity categories of the state by evading state surveillance systems and creating alternative networks of connection outside state territoriality (Torpey 2000). The creation of the passport and visa system, for example, is a method of monopolizing the capacity to authorize legitimate movement while unambiguously defining national identity categories. Most nation-states base their claims to sovereignty on the notion that their people, however defined, have always lived in that particular place. The erasure of historical movements supports this system and hides the connections between colonialism and the contemporary sovereign state by reframing the current state as a continuation of a historical political entity, not the European colony (Sharma and Wright 2008).

The most recent and substantial attempt to regulate movement in the Bengal borderlands is the border fence, road, and floodlighting project that is being implemented by the Indian government, which resulted in approximately three quarters of the 4,096-km border being fenced (Kabir 2005; Ministry of Home Affairs 2008 Jones 2009a, 2009c). As Moushumi's story indicates, and more interviews that follow will describe, these advances of the state into the borderlands still have not prevented movement across the border but rather have regulated it and channeled it, often through government officials who use their authority for personal gain.

Although the organizing authority of the state was initially weak and slow to arrive in the borderlands, both states worked hard to establish their legitimacy within their territories, a process that became particularly important after Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Both countries had populations that spoke Bengali and had similar cultural histories, which raised questions about the legitimacy of their claims to parts of the former

province of Bengal. The result was intensive government efforts to define separate identity categories, justify their claim to authority over those territories, and emphasize the differences between the two places. This was done by not only drawing lines on the ground but also by creating boundaries between people.

In a speech in 1978, the president of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman, outlined the differences between a Bangladeshi and a Bengali:

Bangladeshi nationalism means we are Bangladeshi. We have a different history. Our country has been born through a different process. Our traditions and culture are different. Our language is different, we are moulding it in our own way—we are modernizing it. We have different prose and poetry; we have different arts and thoughts. Our geographical position is different, our rivers and soils are different. Our people are different. . . . [T]oday a consciousness has grown among our people, which is different from that of the people of our neighboring country. (cited in Huq 1984, 58)

To solidify these distinctions, successive governments altered the constitution of Bangladesh to define the subjects of the state as Bangladeshi, not Bengali (Mursid 1997, 2001). A forty-eight-year-old teacher in Bangladesh explains the difference:

It is in our constitution. We started our independence movement as Bengalis, with our Bengali language. We say we are Bengali because of that. At the middle of the road, our political situation changed. At that time, those who were administrators, they changed the constitution to say that we are Bangladeshi not Bengali.

In India, the state also began to define the population by issuing identification cards for rations at state-sponsored shops. This process had the effect of defining the distinction between legal residents of West Bengal, essentially those who were there when the cards were given, and those who came after, who were classified by the state as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The distinctions between the two places have been further reified in recent years as terrorism has become a threat in India. In the popular discourse in India, the people and territory of Bangladesh have been increasingly described as a premodern threat to the stability of Indian civil society (Jones 2009c).

Both India and Bangladesh attempted to impose their authority in the marginal spaces of the borderlands by drawing lines on the ground and in the popular imagination, but the top-down imposition of identities and homeland narratives is not always accepted by people in their everyday lives (Edensor 2002). Some

might acquiesce and accept the new order when the political situation changes and administrators dictate it, as the forty-eight-year-old teacher suggests. Others might actively fight a system imposed from above. Many other people do neither, however; they live with the system but do not necessarily accept it.

## Multiple, Fragmented, and Partial Sovereign Power

As Scott (2009) suggested, the last sixty years do represent the first period in human history when this process of making state spaces has been actualized, to varying extents, on a global scale. Independent sovereign states can legitimately claim to have some form of control over the vast majority of the territory in the world. In theory at least, almost everyone is subject to the administrative and legal system of a particular sovereign state. This situation has led some scholars to suggest the spread of sovereign states has resulted in the replacement of power relations—where resistance can occur—with violence relations that leave no space for contesting sovereign authority (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004). This section briefly reviews the literature on sovereign power by describing the use of the state of emergency by the state. Then it argues for a more nuanced view that disaggregates sovereign power and the sovereign state by analyzing the conflicted practices of the agents of the state in the borderlands.

In recent years, much of the research on sovereignty has explored Agamben's (1998, 2005) work on the state of exception. Agamben drew on Schmitt (1996) to argue that the power of sovereignty comes not just from being able to make and enforce laws in a defined territory but specifically from being able to decide when those laws can be suspended. The legal systems of all sovereign states include a provision of some kind that allows a declaration of a state of emergency when there is an imminent threat to the continued existence of the state (Hussain 2003; Neocleous 2008). In a state of emergency, the laws of the state remain in place, and most people are still required to follow them; however, the sovereign itself is able to operate aggressively both inside and outside the legal system simultaneously to impose order and authority. States of emergency were originally intended for military threats posed by invading armies but have increasingly been used in other situations, such as during periods of labor unrest, economic crisis, or environmental disaster. Neocleous (2008) argued that the declaration of an emergency

is not a rare event but rather a normal part of the practice of sovereignty in the modern era. In the state of emergency, the sovereign can use violence without consequences whenever it perceives its authority is threatened, which leaves very little space for resistance (Martinot 2001; Calarco and DeCaroli 2007). Even when there is not a declaration of emergency, and the internal practices of a state can be questioned and reworked, the fundamental concept of sovereignty cannot be contested. If it is, the sovereign can declare an emergency and use exceptional violence to enforce its authority (Vacarme 2004; DeCaroli 2007).

Scholars have successfully applied Agamben's work on sovereign power and violence, which was theorized in relation to Nazi camps in World War II, to the U.S. prison at Guantánamo Bay, the U.S. policy of extraordinary rendition, and to Israeli policies in Palestine (Gregory 2004; Minca 2007). Others have taken it further afield to argue that gated communities or export processing zones are spaces of exception or even that the bounded wonderlands of amusement parks could be fruitfully analyzed in this way (Ek 2006). In my view, these applications of Agamben's theory take it too far from its initial, limited focus on sovereignty and absolute violence. In Agamben's theorization what is exceptional is not simply that there is a different set of rules. It is specifically the ability to kill someone, or detain someone indefinitely without consequences, while the normal laws are still in place. It is the rendering of a political citizen into bare life that constitutes the exceptional violence. These other spaces where particular laws are altered or not enforced, say, in an export processing zone, deserve scrutiny but are not examples of Agamben's exceptional violence. There are other ways to theorize these fuzzy spaces in between the legal and illegal, such as Yiftachel's (2009) concept of "gray spacing" or Menjívar's (2006) concept of "liminal legality."

The India–Bangladesh borderlands demonstrate both the use of exceptional violence to attempt to expand sovereign authority (Jones 2009a) and its incomplete and contradictory practice. The expansion of the state relies on taking the unknown and making it legible by defining the people and the types of activities that are legitimate in a bounded territory (Foucault 1971, 1978). The authority of the state is based in the ability to standardize practices in a particular territory, which allows them to be monitored, administered, and controlled. In the borderlands, the process of instituting state authority occurs primarily through the regulation of movement of people and goods in and out of the territory (Megoran, Raballand, and Bouyjou 2005). Borders

generally, and fences specifically, are performances of control (Sack 1986). They materialize the authority of the state and its agents to make the decision on law and order in that space. As Van Schendel and Abraham (2005, 9) argued, the effort to regulate and define practices at the border "constructs conceptual barriers between illicit bad-guy activity (trafficking, smuggling) and state-authorized good guy activities (trade, migration) that obscure how these are often part of a single spectrum." The border is a key site for the state to establish the binaries of power that frame the world as citizen–alien, nation–foreign, here–there, and we–they.

The broad strategies for defining the boundaries between legal and illegal activities in a territory are set in the capital; however, the implementation of these decisions is delegated to local officials as the agents of the state in the area. At this point of translation between state strategy and local tactics, the claim of sovereignty is deployed, renegotiated, and reinterpreted every day. In the Bengal borderlands, the agents of the state often use the claim of sovereign authority to allow themselves to operate outside the regulations and laws of the state. As a result, clear distinctions emerge among movement that is legal, movement that is illegal but allowed by the agents of the state, and movement that is illegal and results in an exceptional violent response by the agents of the state (Heyman 1999; Jones 2009a). From 2000 to 2009, more than 800 Bangladeshi citizens were killed by the BSF, and hundreds more were shot and injured, often without prior warning and without consequences for the border guards (Odhikar 2009).

The different sets of priorities of the state and the border guards are materialized through two different ways for goods and people to move across the border: the official crossing points and the hundreds of gates and rivers that mark gaps in the Indian border fence. A nearly universal strategy deployed by states to organize and regulate the flow of goods and people across their borders is the designation of particular points where movement is allowed to occur (Torpey 2000; Megoran, Raballand, and Bouyjou 2005; Sharma and Wright 2008). At these official crossing points, travelers submit to the authority of the state by identifying themselves with documents that demonstrate their position in the citizenship regime of the state (Salter 2006, 2008). At the long stretches between these official sites, all movement of people and goods across the border is forbidden. In the past ten years the government of India has constructed fences, roads, and floodlights to regulate border spaces and to prevent any unauthorized movement. Rather than stopping the flow of goods and



people across the border, however, the security fence directed and intensified cross-border movements through the gates and rivers controlled by the border guards.

In an interview, a twenty-four-year-old Indian contractor whose company worked on a large section of the fence in West Bengal explains the official purpose of the fence but also the illegal activities that are still allowed:

Q: Why is the fence being built?

A: The president has demanded it no matter what the cost. The fence must be finished by 2007. The main reason is terrorism. Bangladesh is the only way terrorists can enter India. . . . The second reason is smuggling but that is not as important. Really the government does not care about that. Anyway, that will continue because the border guards will take some money and let it happen.

Although movement across the border is illegal, movement through the border fence—which is located 150 m away from the borderline in accordance with a 1974 treaty with Bangladesh—is sanctioned by the Indian state under certain circumstances. This distinction allows the border guards to establish their own system of licit and illicit activities.

The 150-m zone of Indian territory between the fence and the borderline is not an empty no-man's-land; the land is owned by many small-scale farmers who need access to their fields (Kabir 2005; Jones 2009a). To accommodate these Indian farmers, hundreds of gates were constructed and are operated by the border guards. Although these gates and rivers are not official border crossing points, they literally make the border quite porous, as there are hundreds of potential points for people and goods to pass through the border fence.

These gates and rivers function quite differently from the official border crossing points. At the official border crossing, people are judged by the agents of the state to be citizens of one state or another with valid documents and intentions. Goods are regulated by the state and (in theory) taxed properly. At the official crossing point, the view of the state is powerful, and individuals submit to the state's authority to decide their legitimacy (Salter 2006). At the gates and river crossings, people do not submit simply to the authority of the state but specifically to the authority of the border guards. With the weapons and uniforms provided by the state, they decide the types of activities that can be allowed, regardless of whether they are legal under the sovereignty regime of the state.

A forty-six-year-old shop owner in India suggests that BSF officials actively try to be posted along the border

with Bangladesh so that they can take advantage of the increased authority the fence provides them:

Those BSF soldiers who are working elsewhere in India want to come and work in Hili [a border town]. They give a bribe in upper levels in order to be posted here. If they stay here for five years they are able to take five lakhs [500,000 rupees; US\$11,000] then go elsewhere. It is done outside government channels. As long as this continues then the barbed wire fence is worthless.

The ability to make that amount of money is significant considering that the starting salary for an Indian border guard is 2,550 rupees per month (US\$57) and the director general of the BSF only makes 26,000 rupees per month (US\$570; BSF 2009). Indeed, the actions of the border guards themselves can easily be understood as examples of resilience and reworking in their power relations with the Indian state. Although the state sets their salaries and dictates their duties, they have subverted this authority by finding alternative ways to survive beyond their salaries.

A thirty-five-year-old taxi driver in India explains how the system works:

Q: How did you go to Bangladesh?

A: I crossed the border. I know a man who was in the business of smuggling in that area. First he told the BSF that I was going to come. The guard on our side, the Indian, told the other guards on the Indian side and another man told the Bangladesh side. . . . The BDR asked me my name, I said it. Then they asked to see a photo, I showed them. They already had a copy and they compared it then let me go. . . . You do understand about BSF, they earn their money at the border. They earn some money illegally. The brokers run their business by always giving money to the border guards.

The arrangement with the border guards that allows smuggling and migration to occur is called *line-ghat*. The word *ghat* refers to the steps that lead into a pool or pond, but in this connotation it simply means a gap in the border that allows goods and people to flow through. The line-ghat opens when the correct border guards are on duty and it closes again when their shift ends. A forty-three-year-old smuggler in Bangladesh explains line-ghat:

Those who are the border security officers, the BSF, they are on duty there. All of them are not bad men, some are good. If you want to go, you talk to those good BSF men that speak Bengali and tell them that you need to go for a little bit of time to see some relatives. They say, "OK, go ahead. Come back when I am on duty again." We call

this line-ghat. You have to tell them because they are in charge of border security.

His description of what constitutes “good” and “bad” behavior is particularly noteworthy. In his understanding, the border guards are generally bad because they enforce the laws of India and do not allow goods or people to cross the border. Nevertheless, there are also some good men that allow the border to be transgressed.

Although the border guards and fence are meant to enforce the laws of the state, the result is often something different. The guards, as the individuals who possess the authority to make the decision on life and death, use this ability to enforce their own authority in the borderlands, not just the sovereignty of the state. Anyone and anything can go across the border for a bribe. The cattle that cross the border even have pink numbers painted on their sides to indicate that the unofficial “tax” has been paid to the BSF. As Van Schendel and Abraham (2005, 7) argued, “Both law and crime emerge from historical and ongoing struggles over legitimacy, in the course of which powerful groups succeed in delegitimizing and criminalizing certain practices.”

Of course, some activities in the borderlands still do result in a violent response from the border security forces (Jones 2009a). Although the violence has increased in recent years as the porous border has been represented as a terrorist threat by the Indian government and media, in practice the single activity—from the perspective of borderland residents—that results in a violent response is not submitting to the authority of the guards in the borderlands. A thirty-four-year-old primary school teacher in India states:

My school is only 50 meters from the border. . . . This morning when I went to school I heard that last night either a Bangladeshi or an Indian was trying to cross the border and were fired on by the BSF. *They get fired on if they try to cross without bribing the BSF.*

A forty-five-year-old businessperson in India states:

For people that are in a bad situation, those who live hand to mouth, they cannot afford the 1,000 or 2,000 taka necessary, it is impossible for them. It is hard for them and they cannot go. Even if they have warm feelings for their relatives, if they don’t have money they cannot go. *Or they go without consulting the BSF and risk their lives.*

A twenty-nine-year-old smuggler in Bangladesh said:

Recently I had a nephew who was captured by the BSF. *He did not give money to the BSF guards, which created a problem.*

According to the thirty-five-year-old taxi driver in India:

A few days ago someone was crossing the border and they were fired on. The BSF shot them. *In the border area if you cross the border secretly and they shoot you, you can’t do anything about it. They can kill you.*

These killings in the borderlands are exceptional violence, in Agamben’s terms, because they happen without warning and without consequence for the border guards. Despite the violence and the large fencing project, however, neither the borderlands nor the entire state territory can be understood as a completely enclosed space of sovereign power where there is a “state of exception.” The submission to the border guards is not necessarily submission to the sovereign power of the state. Instead, it is submission to the authority of the border guards, specifically, to regulate that space. Although they gain their legitimacy from the sovereignty of the state, they do not simply enforce the laws and regulations of the state but also their own regimes of licit and illicit practices. The paradox of the borderlands is that the exceptional violence is done in the name of the state but primarily to conduct activities outside the ambit of the state. Furthermore, the extreme violence of the border guards illustrates their weakness and the incomplete control of the space. The need to kill hundreds of people to direct the cross-border flows to the gates demonstrates that many people refuse both the state’s claim to regulate the space and the border guards’ violence regime.

## Alternatives to Resistance

Despite the hardening of the border and the institutionalization of the authority of the border security forces, many people continue to find ways to evade both the state-sanctioned territorial line and the violently enforced bribery regime of the border security forces. But should these actions that subvert the state and the border guards in these less-than-completely administered spaces be understood as resistance to sovereign power?

The potential of cross-border movement to be a form of resistance to the nation-state has been a topic of keen interest for many scholars of transnationalism for a few decades (Bhabha 1994; K. Mitchell 1997; Blunt 2007; Smith and Bakker 2008). K. Mitchell (1997, 101) argued that cross-border movement is attractive to scholars because

as borders are normally associated with power relations—the power to keep in or out—the movement across borders, whether they be national borders, disciplinary borders or theoretical borders, carries with it the febrile fascination and flavor of the illicit . . . [which] provides numerous poststructural theorists the abstract position of inbetweenness and movement necessary for the leverage of critique to be inserted into linear and containing narratives of space and time.

Mitchell's critique of some work in transnationalism for essentializing state territorial categories and the border is important. In economic geography, she suggested, cross-border economic flows are often described as being contained by borders or as breaching them, in both cases positing the preexistence of a clearly defined border that divides discrete spaces. Similarly, literature on international migration and diaspora tends to reify the home country and the new country as defined cultural spaces that the traveler moves between (Brubaker 2005). As K. Mitchell (1997, 103) put it, “[m]igrants leave one contained and defined spatial territory, cross one or more borders, and arrive in another identifiable space.” Indeed, the term *transnationalism* itself creates the idea of nations as the preexisting categories that can then be transcended.

Brubaker (2002) identified this problem of assuming preexisting groups as “groupism.” He argued—here specifically referring to diasporic identity categories—that

To overcome these problems of groupism . . . we should think of diaspora not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim. . . . As a category of practice, “diaspora” is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties. (Brubaker 2005, 12)

Elsewhere Brubaker has similarly argued that other identity categories including ethnicity, nations, and race should not be understood as fixed things but rather as perspectives on the world that are always in the process of becoming (Brubaker 2002).

Brubaker and Mitchell's interventions about essentializing state territorial and group identity categories help to reframe borders as always inchoate and incomplete (Jones 2009b), shifting the discussion about borders away from how preexisting territorial and identity categories are transgressed to a discussion of how these never quite complete categories of homeland and nation are interpreted, experienced, or ignored. The point is not, as some of the literature in transnationalism might have it, that cross-border connections displace

the *either India or Bangladesh* frame with *both India and Bangladesh*. Instead, the movement across the border, and the thinking outside the state territorial and identity categories, is better understood as demonstrating that *neither India nor Bangladesh* are fixed and finalized categories.

T. Mitchell (1990) made a similar argument about the dominance–resistance literature. Mitchell argues that utilizing dualistic language to explain power in social practices reifies a dualistic world of dominance and resistance. He instead suggests:

an alternative approach to the understanding of domination, one that not only avoids the dualism of contemporary social scientific writing but, through an analysis of the process I call “enframing,” examines how domination works through actually constructing a seemingly dualistic world. (T. Mitchell 1990, 547)

Power comes from the process of enframing, which is the ability to define the categories that order daily life and create the either–or schemes of power. Taking Mitchell's view to the border, the limits of the imagination are established as the border becomes the line that divides one clearly defined state territory from another. This boundary also represents the division of one identity category from another. Consequently, activities that disrupt the moment of enframing, when the either–or binaries of identity, territory, and power are imagined and promulgated, emerge as crucial for understanding alternatives to sovereign power.

Indeed, as Edkins and Pin-Fat (2004) suggested, many actions that are categorized by scholars as resistance are not because they cannot result in a fundamental change in the structure of the relationship or in the previous enframing of the state. Similarly, Katz's (2004) scheme that classifies most actions as resilience and reworking also reserves resistance for situations when contestation can potentially overthrow the polarity of power relations. In terms of sovereign power, although people might break the laws of the state or cross a border illegally, that does not fundamentally alter who is the sovereign authority. These actions are in defiance of the sovereign authority but are not necessarily resistance to the enframing that gives the sovereign its authority.

To move beyond this impasse, Edkins and Pin-Fat (2004) suggested two strategies for re-creating a space for contesting sovereign power. Their first suggestion was that sovereign power can be contested through the acceptance of the role of bare life—they used the example of the lone man standing in front of the Chinese tanks near Tiananmen Square—which through

its naked vulnerability exposes the violence of the system. As this article demonstrates, this misses the mark because it stems from their misinterpretation of exceptional violence as indicative of absolute authority in an enclosed sovereign space. Here, by disaggregating the sovereign power of the border guards and the sovereign state, exceptional violence is understood as demonstrating weakness and the incomplete control of the state. Their second proposal, however, moves us beyond the debilitating dominance–resistance binary toward the process of enframing identified by T. Mitchell. Edkins and Pin-Fat (2004, 13) argued that a space for contestation can be created “through a refusal to draw lines” that allow sovereign power to be exercised.

## Spaces of Refusal

Political borders are not just lines drawn by the sovereign state; they are the lines par excellence. Therefore, the borderlands, where the performance of sovereignty is often the most visible and where exceptional violence is regularly deployed, emerge as a key site to examine how the incomplete spread of sovereign authority is experienced and understood in everyday life. By maneuvering outside the gaze of the border guards and by disregarding the lines drawn by the state on the ground and in the imagination, the borderland residents continue to think about the people and territory in ways that do not conform to state-sanctioned categories. Rather than the zones of escape of previous generations (Scott 2009), where people fled the ordering regime of the state into unadministered areas, these are spaces of refusal where the state is there but its power is incomplete and fragmented. These other ways of seeing, knowing, and being are important acts that refuse the sovereign power’s claim to define subjects and activities in those spaces.

Movement across the border outside the purview of the state and the border guards is, by design, difficult to locate and analyze, but it certainly exists (Van Schendel and Abraham 2005; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007). At the Bengal border, many people have legitimate reasons to enter the border zone to work on their farmland. Other people, who intend to cross the border, use this zone as cover to allow them to move through the space undetected and unregulated. A sixty-year-old house cleaner in India explains:

There are people that take a scythe and bag and cut grass for their animals near the border. By cutting and cutting they cross the border. If anyone asks what they are doing,

they say cutting grass. When no one is there, they cross the border. Many people go this way. Sometimes there are holes in the ground. Someone on one side will drop something in the hole. Then someone cutting grass from the other side will go there and pick it up and bring it to their house. Things cross the border in this way.

Even at the more completely securitized spaces near the official crossing points, people find ways to evade dominating authority.

The town of Hili, which was divided in half by the 1947 partition, is one of the few official crossing points between India and Bangladesh in northern Bengal. Although today there is a brick and concrete wall that divides the town in half along the railroad track that marks the border, both sides are still known by the old name of Hili. Border guards patrol both sides of the wall and trucks line up along the road with goods that are passing through customs. Despite all of these performances of security in Hili, there are also many children sitting, playing, and jumping over the wall (“Children used for smuggling” 2009). The thirty-two-year-old chairperson of Bangladeshi Hili explains:

[In English] Right, our country is a poor country. Many people live hand to mouth. Our country has many, many people. Vagabond people, vagabond children, vagabond students, there are many unemployed people in our country. If they bring something from India they are able to make a small profit. They are crossing the border in hopes of making a profit. It is smuggling. It is not large scale but only poor people smuggling. [At the official border crossing point] there is smuggling by under invoicing and other things, but this is not like that. They are only doing it to eat something. This is at such a small scale that you cannot even call it smuggling. They speak in the same way as they do on the other side. If the country had not been divided then this would not be necessary. It happens only because this is the border area. Children can come and go carrying goods.

The large wall in Hili is meant to prevent all movement across the border. If that is insufficient, the numerous guards are meant to enforce the laws of the state. At Hili, at least, that dominance relationship has been reworked to allow some transgressions of the border in full view of the agents of the state. Although adults are prohibited from jumping over the wall, children come and go as they please. In the process, connections are maintained across the borders imposed by the state and alternative practices persist that demonstrate, albeit through minor cracks in the façade, that the sovereignty of the state is not absolute.

The refusal of an imposed order, however, does not have to include the active transgression of the border. It can also be manifested in a refusal to accept state-sanctioned categories of people and territory. This occurs by not accepting an exclusionary vision of who is a Bengali and who should live in Bengal, by not accepting a binary vision of space and identity, and by denying the state the right to define subjects. By thinking outside state categories, what is contested is the discourse that defines the actions of the state and its agents as true and right and all other practices and knowledge as illegitimate.

In the binary enframing of the state, there is no space for ambivalence or ignorance: Everyone is either Indian or Bangladeshi. Everyone must know who they are and where they belong, which defines their existence. Nevertheless, the current state-sanctioned categories of Indian and Bangladeshi are just over forty years old, and other identity categories have been practiced during the lifetimes of many residents, including Pakistani, Hindu, Muslim, Bengali, and British Indian. There are also many more localized categories like Dinajpuri and Rajbongshi.

One of the most widely practiced of these alternative identities is a broadly defined Bengali category that encompasses the people on both sides of the border. A thirty-year-old primary school teacher in Bangladesh, who has never visited India, explains the connections he perceives with people across the border:

Of course they are totally they are like us. Culture like us. Language like us. Behavior like us. They don't know Hindi, or any other language, except Bengali. There is no difference at all. Only there is one thing, if I desire to go there from here I cannot.

On both sides of the border there is a persistent, widely held view that the 1947 partition of the province of Bengal was a mistake that had predominantly negative consequences. A twenty-seven-year-old businessperson in India said:

We did not want the separation. We wanted to be one country. If Bengal was not divided then you would not be able to talk to me here. My house over there [in contemporary Bangladesh], I would have stayed there. The older people in the area are all sad about the state of the country. Hindus and Muslims, everyone in both communities is sad. . . . Those who came here through exchange, they are not happy either. It is an error.

The frustration about the division emerges from the feeling that the current borders do not reflect local history or perspectives. Instead, the border is seen as an

imposition by outside forces to weaken and divide the previously strong Bengali presence in South Asian affairs.

A sixty-five-year-old retired teacher in India explains:

It is true people are sad [about the division]. Nobody wanted it. But it happened. . . . When it happened, everything was divided, our power, our capacity, our education, our allegiance, everything.

According to a thirty-eight-year-old businessperson in India:

Our leaders, they divided us. The people did not want this. By heart we are the same, even if he is Hindu or Muslim. But the leaders in power they divided us. The people in Bangladesh want to come here, we want to go there. That is always in our mind.

His final sentence is the crux of the argument in this article. Virtually everyone accepts that the division of Bengal into India and Bangladesh is a settled fact. Very few people at this moment are actively contesting the sovereign authority of either country. Nevertheless, many if not most people in the borderlands continue to think about the territory and the people in different terms than those set by the state. They abide by state sovereignty, but alternative frameworks are, as the businessperson says, "always in our mind."

Indeed, it is not just a united Bengali identity category that persists across the India–Bangladesh divide. On both sides of the India–Bangladesh border in northern Bengal there are small populations of people who are categorized, at least by others, as Adivasi. Adivasi is a broad term used to denote populations that are perceived to be indigenous and not part of the larger Indo-European ethnic, cultural, or religious groups in the area. As the research for this project was conducted, several Adivasi families were interviewed in hopes that they would be able to provide an alternative perspective on communal religious distinctions and the state categories of Indian and Bangladeshi. According to a twenty-six-year-old homemaker in Bangladesh:

Q: Can you find a difference between Adivasis and other peoples?

A: Difference? How can I see it? We are all brothers. Everyone. People are people. Everyone is the same kind.

Q: Why do people call you Adivasi then?

A: People have been calling us Adivasi for fourteen generations. What our ancestors did to get this name, we do not know.

Three weeks later and 30 km away, a fifty-six-year-old homemaker in Bangladesh makes the identical point:

Q: Is there any difference between Bengalis and Adivasis?

A: What kind of difference can there be between Bengali and Adivasi? People are one. There are not any differences.

Q: But if there is no difference why do people still call you Adivasi?

A: People have been calling us that since before my grandfather's time. What can I say now?

The perspective these women provide, which was reiterated in other interviews, is instructive in its steadfast refusal to be hemmed in by categories and kinds. In their matter-of-fact dismissal of the categories that shape their neighbors' lives, these women question the taken-for-granted logic of the sovereign state as we, as humans, attempt to negotiate the damage modern ordering, bordering, and categorizing have wrought on the world. They provide the hope that the violence done through the enframing of the state cannot only be endured and reworked, but also undone.

### Making Space for the Possible

One thing I do know is that we are all brothers and our blood is the same. If I cut you, it is red. Mine is too. (Fifty-two-year-old businessperson in India)

Moushumi and the thousands of other people like her who live close to the border between India and Bangladesh see the performance of state sovereignty every day. Whereas generations ago there were zones of escape outside the sovereign state system, today most of the territory in the world has been claimed and assigned to a particular state. Flight is no longer an option. Nevertheless, the homogenous maps of the state, with clean lines separating different peoples and territories, still do not completely dictate everyday existence along the border. People accept that the state is there and a categorical order has been imposed, but they do not necessarily accept those categories. When required, they perform their role as subjects of the state, but at other times they continue to think and live in alternative configurations that maintain connections across, through, and around sovereign state territoriality. People in the borderlands smuggle goods across the border, they refuse to submit to the border guards, they refuse to apply for a passport, they refuse to travel many kilometers to an official crossing point, and they refuse to accept the authority of the state to regulate their movement. Moushumi refuses to be de-

nied a visit with her son and grandchildren simply because the state has redefined territorial categories in the area.

To understand the significance of these acts of refusal, this article makes three arguments about sovereign power at the border. First, although the sovereign state system is represented as administering all of the territory in the world, there are many places where sovereign power is new, uneven, and tenuous. In these spaces, sovereign power operates but not in the absolute terms claimed by the state, represented on maps, or assumed by some scholars. Rather than beginning with the view that the state has absolute authority in these spaces, which reifies state sovereignty and its claim to power, it should be understood as partial and conflicted, as the agents of the state make contradictory decisions on enforcing sovereign authority every day. The literature on the violence of the exception still needs to be engaged but in a more critical manner that emphasizes the incomplete and uneven practice of sovereign power. Rather than a generalized "state of exception," the focus should be on how, when, where, and why exceptional violence is periodically materialized. There is a moment and a decision by an agent, not an all-encompassing state.

Second, this article argues for a more nuanced conceptualization of contestation in both the sovereign power and dominance-resistance literatures. Scholars of sovereign power are right to suggest that there is no space for resistance in a completely enclosed sovereign space, where the violence of the exception has become the rule, but the uneven and conflicted practice of sovereignty leaves many not completely enclosed spaces within the territory of the state. This article demonstrates this temporal and spatial unevenness at the border, where the performances of security and sovereignty are often most conspicuous, but it is also obvious in many other places like neglected urban slums. Indeed, the necessity of the overt performances at the border, and the violence regime of the border guards, demonstrates the incompleteness of the sovereignty claim. At the same time, even in these partially administered spaces, every action in defiance of the state or the border guards should not be understood as resistance. Instead, following Katz (2004), it is more useful to think of many of these actions as reworking or resilience in a difficult situation. These activities make life possible but do not result in, or even envision, emancipation from that situation.

Third, to get out of the binary enframing of domination-resistance, spaces of refusal are proposed for conceptualizing the multiple strategies that

transgress, reinterpret, and ignore sovereign power but do not necessarily rise to the level of overt political resistance. Although these activities cannot be understood, or romanticized, as examples of oppositional consciousness that achieve emancipatory change, these actions are nevertheless important. In these spaces of refusal, the binary enframing of the state is not accepted, which preserves alternative mental, emotional, and practical networks that could eventually be drawn on. This is not to say that any of these other categories practiced by people in the borderlands are the true and legitimate categories. They are not. All categorical schemes are partial, incomplete, and always in the process of becoming (Brubaker 2002). The argument here is simply that the territorial and identity categories of state subjectivity are not the only option, despite maps and state discourses that attempt to foreclose these other possibilities. By emphasizing nuance, fragmentation, and process, the possible remains.

The borderlands, therefore, are both a space where the violence regimes of the state and the border guards are periodically materialized and a space of refusal where situated ways of being and knowing continue to exist. Even as the state ratchets up the performance of its sovereign power by attempting to lock down and close the border, people continue to move and think outside the binary enframing of the state. By not allowing the sovereign power to draw social boundaries between people, and by not respecting the territorial lines drawn on the ground, the potential for alternatives is created, even if at the present moment they are not being actualized.

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## Note

1. Moushumi is a pseudonym. All interviews for this project were conducted anonymously, except for those with elected public officials. The research described in this article is based on 101 in-depth interviews and fifteen focus groups conducted in the Indian state of West Bengal and Bangladesh. The interviews were conducted in Bengali,

except where indicated [in English], and translated by the author in collaboration with a research assistant in Bangladesh. Through a deep engagement with the everyday lives of people who live in the borderlands, this article attempts to move beyond what Ortner (1995) called the “ethnographic refusal” to consider the meanings and implications of quotidian activities.

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