Conclusion: The Politics of Belonging in the Kashmir Borderland

In this book I have tackled the question of how the Kashmir dispute is understood on both sides of the LoC by focusing on the space of conflict, that is, what is perceived as contested by those living in the affected territories. This space of conflict coincides with the borderland, and is characterized by differentiation done through bordering processes that set spatial hierarchies which are critical for interpreting international reality. As highlighted in Chapter 2, although not recognized as political entities borderlands are essential spaces for the inquiry about transformations in the international reality. The adoption of a borderland perspective for examining the Kashmir conflict has underscored the difference between the representation of the dispute as an interstate and intrastate affair, and the manifestation of conflict in everyday life in the disputed territories. In so doing, this perspective has unravelled the problem, caused by territorial fixation, of people’s exclusion and marginalization from state belonging, which is contrasted with their experiences of ‘multi-territoriality’ or the possibility of accessing or connecting to diverse territories.[[1]](#endnote-1)

For those living in the disputed territories, the Kashmir issue is essentially about the impossibility of participating in a political project or taking a decision about their own political future. This sentiment is mainly articulated in terms of belonging—that is, by tracing a relationship with a multitude of places and spaces—but also in terms of by departing from an experience of dispossession or rootlessness. During this research, belonging has proved to be a key concept for understanding what is at stake in this conflict. This concept entails a more relational understanding of the position of people living in these areas as members of one collective or the other—something that is usually overlooked in favour of identity-based understandings of the dispute.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In this concluding chapter I address how the study of belonging is a useful analytical tool for addressing the spatial dimension of conflicts about borders. Belonging serves to uncover a crucial aspect of politics related to territorial fixity and identity that are usually assumed as implicit in the development of ethnic conflicts. Since it has a relational character and entails various allegiances, the study of belonging encourages the exploration of cosmopolitan views that are usually undermined in identitarian narratives, such as those that have tended to dominate the study of the Kashmir dispute since the mid-1990s.[[3]](#endnote-3) A focus on belonging can provide new ways to address conflicts through the exploration of more inclusive politics.

The chapter is structured as follows. I first briefly illustrate what the study of belonging can reveal in relation to Kashmir through the case of Ahmed, a single individual who is part of a collective that has been neglected in the dispute. Then, I draw on the literature from migration and gender studies, highlighting its relational understanding of place and identity and demonstrating how this relational approach can be useful to examine how people living in disputed border contexts articulate claims for recognition. Finally, since belonging is political, I address the politics of belonging in relation to forms of bordering, that is, the ways in which the world is ordered and differentiated.

**The case of Ahmed**

On a hot summer afternoon in Baltistan, I met a group of displaced people from the border area between Baltistan and Ladakh. Among them was Ahmed, a man in his mid-seventies, who narrated the following biographical account in which borders and national allegiances play a central role.

In 1963 I went to Skardu [from a village in Chorbat La area, eastern Baltistan] for a court case regarding a land dispute. Once there, I joined the army as a soldier. I was married and since I got this job, I used to visit my family once a year for one or two months [....] In 1965 I was posted in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, in front of Baramulla [a district and a city in the Kashmir Valley on the Indian side]. I was in the regular army, but I was asked, along with others, to disguise as *muhajideen* and to infiltrate through the Kel sector. This was during the rule of Ayub Khan [….] In 1971 I was posted in Kel and we were exchanging fire for 14 days. Then the whole unit was sent back to Gilgit. There I asked about my village and the major informed me that we ‘were eating salt’, a polite way to say things were not going well there. I flew back to Skardu and I got the news [....] My village and my family were now on the Indian side. One day I went to Fraono village, the new border, just in front of the newly acquired Indian territory [….] There, I also learnt that the commander in charge during the fighting was Major Bashir, a Bengali major and that he had no interest for Pakistan. In fact, he was defending Indian interests because at the time Bengalis were fighting against Pakistan and the Indian Government was supporting them [the Bangladesh Liberation War]. Pakistanis were not interested in these areas because they were mountain regions, although India was willing to return the villages [in the peace conversations of Simla in 1972]. The Pakistani Prime Minister Bhutto negotiated the return of villages in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Lahore sector but not ours [those in Chorbat La]. The government gave our villages away. We did not get any compensation for the resettlement [....] Here [in Pakistan] we suffered a lot. Those who remained on the Indian side also suffered for many years. They could not move, their houses were constantly searched and people were harassed. We know that. (Interview conducted in July 2014 in Urdu and Balti with the assistance of a translator).

Ahmed’s story poses some questions about the difference between the representation of conflicts and how they are perceived and lived by those affected. Ahmed’s testimony is that of a single person, one of the several thousand displaced people in India from the border areas dividing Baltistan and Ladakh and hundreds of thousands from the Kashmir Valley and Jammu living in Pakistan-controlled AJK. It can be said that the story of the collectivity that Ahmed represents is not on the map, in the sense that the places he mentions (remote, sparsely populated villages) and the historical events associated with these places have been largely ignored in the literature on the Kashmir conflict, or have been mentioned only in passing.[[4]](#endnote-4) This may have something to do with the scale of the ‘international’—understood as being beyond the state level (that is, beyond the state border) or defined essentially by border-crossing or transnationalism. This scale hides the level of those living between these spaces, such as the case of borderland territories, from analysis. To make sense of the international, Didier Bigo proposes the use of field studies, as they ‘allow us to distance ourselves from the academic (and philosophical) illusion of the primacy of discourse, obliging us to reflect further on the technologies of power and resistance.’[[5]](#endnote-5)

This ignoring of the collectivity that Ahmed represents—despite the geopolitical importance of the area in which these people live—can be also related to the focus on larger groups in international studies. These larger groups are normally referred to simply as ‘actors’, as if they were embodying individual action, even though there has been increasing recognition in recent decades that individuals also count in international affairs. To some degree, Ahmed’s story biographical trajectory as a soldier tells about the vicissitudes of the of the India-Pakistan conflict that began in 1947 to take control of the former princely State of Jammu and Kashmir.

Ahmed is neither a proper Pakistani citizen nor a Kashmiri.[[6]](#endnote-6) He is not a proper Pakistani citizen because the area where he lives is considered ‘disputed’ and not integrated into Pakistan’s constitutional framework. Consequently, those living in Gilgit-Baltistan lack basic constitutional rights, e.g., they can neither vote nor be elected in the Pakistani general elections.[[7]](#endnote-7) Despite this, Ahmed, like many others, feels that the political aspects of the Kashmir dispute are not his concern, except for the fact that the conflict caused him to be separated from his village and family and dramatically changed his life.

When asked about their understanding of the Kashmir dispute, Ahmed and the members of other divided families in Baltistan underlined the shared experiences they went through after Partition. They did not frame their views on their condition as related to their minority status as Baltis (non-Kashmiris), but rather on their precarious position living in a disputed area characterized by a lack of basic constitutional rights. In other words, their views about themselves were connected to their position in a wider structure, to how they fit (or did not fit) into the political space formed by the figuration of the border.[[8]](#endnote-8) These views were also related to the problematic relationship between ‘being’ (as a political subject) and attachment to a ‘place’ (as a physical or a symbolic territory) that is implied in the notion of belonging.

**Understanding belonging: space and identity**

The study of belonging has found a fertile niche in works on migration and feminist epistemologies. Belonging is a useful analytical tool for addressing the spatial dimension of conflicts about borders.[[9]](#endnote-9) In migration studies, such as the work of Floya Anthias, it is connected to the relational position of migrants in terms of the construction of a ‘we-ness’ and ‘otherness’ and the negotiation of this ambivalence.[[10]](#endnote-10) Eva Youkhana has examined belonging as a form of placemaking through migrants’ spaces of representation.[[11]](#endnote-11) In the case of gender studies, this notion revolves around the construction of women as a group.

Since belonging entails territoriality, its study can contribute to the theoretical debates about the framework of international reality. It questions approaches from the perspectives of political realism—which does not pay attention to individual subjecthood—and constructivism—which tends to consider identity as embodying a high degree of cohesion.[[12]](#endnote-12) In other words, focusing on belonging challenges assumptions about the way the world is ordered. For this purpose, I refer to the Kashmir case to explore contexts under which individuals and groups claim belonging in the disputed territories and the form these claims take. Drawing on Yuval-Davis’ work, I call this the politics of belonging, which ‘comprises the specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very particular ways.’[[13]](#endnote-13) This definition implies considering both hegemonic political projects and the articulation of forms of resistance to them. Both are addressed in this chapter.

While undertaking fieldwork on both sides of the LoC over the period 2009–2014, I paid attention to how the people living in these territories framed the conflict, in contrast to how it is examined at the state and international levels. Although the research outcomes found at the specific sites discussed in this book cannot be considered representative of the whole region, they certainly illustrate how the Kashmir issue is perceived by some of those affected by the conflict in the specific political context in which they live. This work has tried to make sense of this other space—that is, the situation in the disputed territories— and highlight its relevance for possible points of agreement to address the political resolution of the conflict.

Expressions of belonging appear as claims for recognition in contexts of dramatic socio-economic transformation and political uncertainty involving high surveillance and various forms of violence. In the following discussion, I use belonging as an analytical perspective to understand ongoing struggles about placemaking, which constitute the politics of belonging mentioned above. This is tantamount to the Rancieran definition of politics as a moment of contestation that implies the disruption of the established order of domination by one party seeking inclusion (or recognition) on equal terms. It equates to the search of those who do not belong (*la part des sans-part*) for inclusion.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Belonging is generally understood in relation to being in one place or being part of a collective and making claims to or ‘longing’ for other place(s). In this respect, I argue that belonging constitutes a form of displacement that is worth investigating, as it reveals the formation of subjectivities that question existing bordering processes. This can be seen in issues ranging from the treatment and integration of minorities, new waves of migrants within the state polity, and refugees, to the enforced separation of groups across borders, and the militarization of various zones throughout the world. The study of belonging has found a productive niche in feminist epistemologies and migration studies which intersect with the theme of borders and security. For this reason, depending on the feasibility of fieldwork, the study of belonging offers a more discursive and non-hierarchical way to understand the feelings and demands of groups caught in conflict zones. It allows the deconstruction of dominant security discourses and the unveiling of hegemonic power hierarchies.

Belonging, although a form of identity, does not entail the same boundary-drawing and has a relational character. If one defines oneself, or is defined by others, as a Kashmiri it is not the same as acknowledging that one belongs to ‘Kashmir’. Ahmed, the soldier quoted above who fought in the regular Pakistani army, refers to the ‘Pakistanis’ as a collective, hierarchically above him and uninterested in the fate of his own people. Ahmed shows affection towards his people (those living in Chorbat La area), from whom he has been displaced, and does not claim to be Pakistani (Pakistanis are the Others) despite having lived most of his life in a territory controlled by Pakistan and having been enrolled in the Pakistani army. While both belonging and identity indicate membership and may be gradual processes, they do not entail the same intensity.[[15]](#endnote-15) Belonging means tracing a relationship in which a degree of ambivalence and distance is implied when drawing the boundary of membership, whereas identity definitions offer less room for doubt about the group’s boundaries and are often more permanent in time—not to mention that some characteristics of identity, such as language and sex, are not easy to change.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Since the 1990s the social sciences, international studies in particular, have experienced a ‘cultural turn’ fostered by the development of constructivist and postmodernist theories. This has resulted in new approaches to the study of conflicts and political processes that mainly affect non-Western societies. In the study of ‘ethnic’ conflicts, this cultural turn has meant an overemphasis on what Brubaker defines as ‘groupism’—a reification of the bounded character of groups as units for social analysis—which in the case of conflicts is dominated by ethnic identity ascriptions.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In his study of relations between the Hungarian minority and the Romanians in Transylvania, Rogers Brubaker notes that most of the protagonists of ethnic conflict are not ethnic groups per se but organizations, broadly understood.[[18]](#endnote-18) He calls into question the category of ethnic groups, and ethnicity in general, as a domain of analysis. Brubaker’s contribution to the understanding of ethnicity is important to address the difference between identity and belonging. He points out that ‘ethnic’ identity depends on the degree of mobilization by organizations. The same can be found in the study of cultural conflicts in South Asia, in the sense that political institutions—particularly those of the central authorities of the state—can create and perpetuate identity politics.[[19]](#endnote-19)

However, it is not always clear whether organizations can be identified as more or less separate from the ‘people’ or ‘groups’ for whom they claim to speak. The analysis of minorities in a post-socialist state may well differ from that in a postcolonial state because of the different political forms of institutionalization and social cultures. In the case of the Kashmiri nationalism in the Kashmir Valley in India, for example, the categories of ‘Kashmiri’, ‘Indian’, and ‘Pakistani’ can be viewed from the viewpoint of a number of organizations that can be identified as actors in the conflict. However, this conflict has been going on for decades and society as a whole has taken up the political cause in different manners, so ‘ethnic’ assumptions may contain some ‘regime of truth’. As Nirvikar Singh demonstrates in his study of the conflicts in Punjab and Kashmir, political institutions alone do not explain cultural (ethnic) conflicts because they usually overlap with identity markers, which are used as tools for political mobilization. Interestingly, Singh relates the use of identity markers to weak institutionalization.[[20]](#endnote-20) The latter indicates that in contexts of uncertainty (in terms of access to resources) identity affiliations provide a sort of ‘safe haven’ through membership, but in general it is not easy to draw a boundary between ‘organizations’, the society, and ‘groups’.

During my research in the Kashmir Valley, I interviewed people (some of them victims of violence) who were critical of nationalist organizations such as the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), or the nationalist umbrella organization Hurriyat. Respondents occasionally admitted they did not publicly express their dissent because of fear, but they also acknowledged respect for these organizations because their leaders were considered ‘martyrs’ for Kashmir and they worked for the community, that is, the organizations supported the families of the deceased as well as former militants who were in need.[[21]](#endnote-21) Being ‘Kashmiri’ has been equated by the Indian state and some academic works with being Muslim (mainly Sunni) from the Valley and sympathizing with the separatist cause.[[22]](#endnote-22) However, being ‘Kashmiri’ also includes other religious and language categories from the Valley, such as Pandits (Kashmiri speakers following the Hindu religion), Sikhs (Punjabi speakers following the Sikh religion), and beyond the Valley (Pahari speakers and Muslims living in the mountains west of the Kashmir Valley) on the basis of their legal status as ‘State Subjects’—a form of citizenship based on *jus soli* (birth in a territory) which evolved in the colonial period.[[23]](#endnote-23) Experiences from my fieldwork have shown that, despite the conflict and the consequent narrowing of social boundaries, ‘Kashmiri’ is still a broad category in everyday understanding. A Sikh interviewee explained: ‘I am Kashmiri. My ancestors came from Punjab in the nineteenth century, but we are State Subjects. We are from this soil. I speak Kashmiri although I use Punjabi at home.’[[24]](#endnote-24) At the same time, my findings show that the society in the Kashmir Valley and the organizations directly involved in the conflict are interrelated through the dynamics of violence and are therefore not easy to differentiate.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The point is that what is usually referred to as an identity marker is framed in terms of a high degree of cohesion or ‘groupness’ which, in most cases, is nowhere present in the societies labelled with these identity markers. The fluidity among social groups was already pointed out by Barth in 1969, and the understanding of identities as more or less stable categories is a product of Western state institutionalization and the expansion of this political form across the world, which has implied the classification, codification, and subjection of people as the Others.[[26]](#endnote-26) Recent works that deal with historical forms of resistance, such as in the history of the agrarian peoples of the uplands of Southeast Asia by James Scott, conclude that identity is a ‘ political choice’, a strategy related to a context which changes and re-adapts according to circumstances.[[27]](#endnote-27) It is therefore worth looking at the contexts in which these categories operate and, in addition to the analysis of ‘units’ or ‘actors’, it is necessary to consider the positionality of the social groups included in the category—in terms of social background, gender, biographical experiences, worldviews, and expectations—to grasp the power relations that are involved in identity making.

Because it challenges existing borders, the study of belonging unfolds the problematic of place and space not only for groups caught in contested borderlands, but also for those who have been displaced for whatever reason. The focus on belonging unveils ongoing struggles about placemaking which question the normative ways the world is assumed to be divided. As a form of displacement—being neither completely ‘here’ nor ‘there’—the study of belonging entails imagination, as does the study of identity. Tracing relations to a specific space is an act of imagination that implies subverting the current state-of-things but also reflects a preoccupation of the collectivity which transcends an individual’s experience.[[28]](#endnote-28) This can be expressed as a form of nostalgia about the past or as an emphasis on being part of a larger community (beyond existing borders). In this sense, belonging implies both recognition and differentiation and needs to be examined against the current context in which people are being bordered.

**Belonging across borders as claims to recognition**

Since the focus on belonging challenges existing borders (and thereby conceptions of place/space), articulations of belonging are framed within specific contexts that need to be considered. How can people living in a disputed border territory articulate views about the context in which they live and about the world in general? To situate this question, it is necessary to point out at least three main issues. First, people living in disputed contexts may have an ambivalent status as citizens—due to either existing legal systems or a situation of violence and instability—and this affects how they can speak. Second, conflict, when it lasts for a significant period, generates its own social dynamics of fragmentation in which views about the community become severely affected. Third, a border is the product of a specific historical construction, which is normally imposed upon those living in its surrounding areas.

The account of Ahmed mentioned above was related to me during a group meeting with displaced families from villages that were originally part of Pakistan, but which were then captured by India during the war of 1971. The displaced people and separated families caused by this conflict may number a few thousand in Baltistan. Most of them have had to fend for themselves since then, without receiving any compensation from the state. Only a few families have received support from wealthy individual philanthropists who donated plots of land. Similar to others gathered during my fieldwork, Ahmed’s account reflects the sense of disillusionment with the lack of state support despite the fact that they opted for Pakistan at the time of Partition. The same sentiment is expressed with regard to the ambivalent constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan, because of which residents of the region feel excluded as state citizens.[[29]](#endnote-29) As a soldier who participated in military operations of the Pakistani army to capture the Kashmir Valley, Ahmed (and others in Baltistan) sees the Kashmir dispute as the fight for the Kashmir Valley, which is different from his own area. However, Ahmed and other respondents in Baltistan admit that their ‘suffering’, the political uncertainty about the place where they live, is ‘because of Kashmir’ since they know—as shown in Ahmed’s narration—that their border region (between Baltistan and today’s border sub-district of Kargil in Ladakh) is of less importance for Pakistan. A feeling prevails that the LoC has been imposed on them, not only ignoring previous administrative divisions, but also cutting family ties, ignoring previous interactions, and destroying the political aspirations of various groups. For those living in Baltistan, as well as those in other parts of the Kashmir borderland, there is the perception that they had more access to other places and regions (e.g., Xinjiang, Tibet, Srinagar, Simla, and Deoband) before the LoC was established. Baltistan once enjoyed a certain centrality in that world and the present articulations of belonging aim to regain that past. Hence, claims of belonging are based on readings of the present and oriented towards certain aims.

The study of belonging through biographical accounts of the past, present, and future expectations makes it possible to trace specific understandings of space that denote the forms in which people are bordered and their resistance to them. In a way, claiming belonging is a form of empowerment as it implies recognition, or becoming visible. When various groups in AJK claim to belong to Kashmir (as the entity existing before 1947), when those in Baltistan claim to belong to the Tibetan milieu, and when those in the sub-district of Kargil on the Indian side relate themselves to Baltistan, they are showing their discontent with the ways they are being identified and represented within the dispute—as waiting to become part of Pakistan for those in AJK and Baltistan, and as the loyal guardians of the Indian borders, in the case of those living in the sub-district of Kargil. This does not necessarily mean they consider themselves to be ‘Kashmiri’, ‘Tibetan’, or ‘Balti’, as identity markers, since what they emphasize is the act of ‘sharing’ meanings and experiences.[[30]](#endnote-30) The claim of being part of a larger community that transcends existing borders is a reaction to the current marginal position of these groups and is articulated through cultural expressions that challenge the existing borders—preoccupations with past ties, the sharing of language and cultural references, and displays of symbologies. This is because there is no way to articulate alternative forms of dissent in these highly militarized areas, where surveillance is part of everyday life. On the surface articulations of belonging do not appear as subversive as other forms of resistance, since they operate within the constraints of the limited existing political space, but they do imply a re-positioning from an ascribed identity category in the seeking of recognition.

In this light, it is worth considering the observations made by Etienne Balibar in his article ‘Uprisings in the Banlieues’, where he describes the case of the violent revolts that affected the French *banlieues* (suburbs) and were perpetrated by groups uprooted from the French state because they simply did not count in the social and economic programmes of an increasingly de-democratized society.[[31]](#endnote-31) Balibar discusses the use of violence as an indication of the inability of these groups to articulate demands as a collective. They did not have the language or access to the system and were therefore excluded from it. Similar views apply to those living in the disputed Kashmir territories, in the sense that spaces to claim dissent are almost non-existent and the boundaries of the permissible are not explicit. This can be seen in the stone pelting movement that erupted in the Kashmir Valley in 2010, when youth confronted the Indian paramilitary forces deployed in the Valley and particularly in urban areas since 1990 (the beginning of the conflict) by throwing stones at them. Balibar later relates the inability of the groups from the *banlieues* to make collective demands to their situation of exclusion from the system, which is also part of a de-democratization process in the public sphere that is implied in neoliberal governance, a term he borrows from the work of Wendy Brown.[[32]](#endnote-32) Leaving aside the specific question of de-democratization, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this work, Balibar makes the interesting point that the state (national) form becomes irrelevant both from below, as it excludes and further marginalizes the weaker groups, and also from above*,* as is unable to control the multinational capitalist groups who operate irrespective of state regulations.[[33]](#endnote-33) Despite the differences of context, similar conclusions can be drawn from the Kashmir’s disputed territories with regard to the role of the state. The ambivalent legal status of the inhabitants of these territories makes them vulnerable. At the same time, this legal ambivalence allows interventions from above such as the building of large infrastructure projects by multinational companies (such as roads and dams in Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK) and the promotion of large-scale religious and leisure tourism, as described in Chapters 1 and 4.[[34]](#endnote-34) Although Balibar’s work draws on the historical evolution of the Western European state and focuses on the French republican tradition, the processes he describes share similarities with many post-colonial states. In these states, the issue of belonging revolves around the question of addressing the social plurality of these societies and the construction of a clear-cut national identity. For this reason, I argue that belonging embodies cosmopolitan views.

Balibar distinguishes a form of cosmopolitanism from below in terms of the politics of representation—as transcending or not fitting into the boundaries of the national frame—from a cosmopolitanism from above, for which the existing boundaries are irrelevant. This cosmopolitanism from below, in consideration of communities of migrant origin, is not recognized (or is denounced as racism) while the cosmopolitanism from above is generally celebrated and becomes irrelevant and detached from conflicts and demands for recognition (economic, and legal recognition) on the ground.[[35]](#endnote-35) In fact, Chris Calhoun relates cosmopolitanism from above with an effort to revitalize liberalism.[[36]](#endnote-36) In this sense belonging, being neither here nor there, relates in many contexts to a contestation of the immobility, spatial and social, that occurs within borders and shares reminiscences with this cosmopolitanism from below in the fact that is not recognized. Hence, by unveiling alternative experiences of territoriality, the study of belonging opens a way of rethinking understandings of political space and borders. Following the case of the Kashmir dispute, my field research has shown that those living in Baltistan and Ladakh (mainly in the Kargil border area) would wish to re-establish direct ties with each other, not only for economic reasons but also for personal and cultural ones. Unlike the border conflict in AJK and the Kashmir Valley, people living in these border areas were never directly involved in violent activities; and yet they have been prevented from meeting and interacting across the border by their respective states.

The contestation of immobility through claims of belonging can also be found in the Kashmir Valley, although framed in different terms. Respondents in various locations of the Kashmir Valley—including religious leaders, such as the influential *Mirwaiz*[[37]](#endnote-37) Umar Farooq—have debated the question of the social heterogeneity of the Kashmir disputed territories and how it can be articulated in a political form. Deciding the future status of the region, they say, is not possible without dialogue between representatives of the various affected groups. As the *Mirwaiz* has pointed out, ‘India and Pakistan have to maintain Jammu and Kashmir as it was in 1947 (the political status) or change it. With respect to the other groups (outside the Kashmir Valley), let them be part of the region, allow them to communicate, let the community talk to each other.’[[38]](#endnote-38) Indeed, it is striking that despite the frequent references to the diversity of Kashmir in research and journalistic work, few efforts have been made to add to the little knowledge that the various groups in the region have about one another. There are many international conferences and academic and political events devoted to the Kashmir issue, but whether those most affected by the conflict can speak to each other remains unaddressed. Notwithstanding the differences, the situation echoes the case described by Balibar regarding those involved in violence in the *banlieues*,in the sense that the plurality existing in the Kashmir disputed territories at the societal level is acknowledged but cannot be politically articulated.

Unlike identity, which underlines differentiation (what is specific to a group), belonging is mainly relational. By articulating senses of belonging beyond the established borders, people separated in border territories propose alternative figurations of space that can be symbolic but also real, in the sense of personal and material exchanges. For example, although people in Baltistan and Ladakh cannot cross the border, divided families meet during religious pilgrimages in third countries such as Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. There, they exchange news and gifts and pass on presents for other separated families who cannot afford to travel. Moreover, videos, sent directly by post or exchanged physically in these third meeting points, circulate containing family information or recordings of the local landscape. Along with symbolic representations of space, such limited mobilities exemplify the subversion of existing borders in these societies. They show that people in these territories have experiences of seeing themselves as part of a wider world, and therefore these expressions and actions contain a sense of cosmopolitanism from below.[[39]](#endnote-39) These limited mobilities contrast with the continued reproduction of knowledge about the border territories (and therefore the border space) as divided along the existing lines. Articulations of belonging therefore contain a reflection on the political space that is worth further investigation.

**Politics of belonging and world (b)ordering**

In the previous sections I have discussed how the notion of belonging, as differentiated but not entirely separated from identity, problematizes the fixed spatial lens through which various social processes and groups (mostly) in non-advanced capitalist societies are examined. The study of belonging shifts attention to how people living in these territories are bordered—i.e., further divided and fragmented—and how, under specific living conditions, they can articulate views about their own context. This provides an understanding of the collective because it questions how, in broader theoretical debates, concepts such as security, sovereignty, and identity have become detached from the empirical experiences they attempt to explain. Since belonging necessarily embodies a translocal and transnational experience, I argue that it generates specific knowledge about international reality and the way the world is ordered.[[40]](#endnote-40) In this regard, I understand the politics of belonging as relating to the circumstances under which people and groups claim belonging and non-belonging. The politics of belonging is the lens through which to scrutinize dimensions of international reality—most importantly legal, security, and surveillance issues—that are silenced in broader theoretical debates.

Nira Yuval-Davies describes the politics of belonging as the continuous maintenance and reproduction of boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers, but also admits that it involves their contestation and challenge by various political agents.[[41]](#endnote-41) This latter aspect is the focus of my attention because the politics of belonging is not only about state belonging, implied in one’s relation to citizenship, but also a form of contesting existing hegemonies which can draw attention to new or alternative understandings of space, insofar as belonging embodies territoriality.[[42]](#endnote-42) Yuval-Davies and Anthias underline the intersectional dimension that is implicit in the notion of belonging at the level of social locations, in the sense that claiming belonging is always affected by other cross-cutting categories (class, gender, race, etc.).[[43]](#endnote-43) Therefore, claiming belonging is also a process of re-appropriation and placemaking by which reality is transformed at various spatial scales.

This book has discussed the manifestations of conflict in the disputed Kashmir territories between India and Pakistan: the militarization of the Kashmir Valley, tight surveillance and lack of basic freedoms in parts of AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan, etc. The dynamics of conflict in the Kashmir Valley have also tightened the boundaries of the community and, as mentioned before, have made dialogue difficult between and within the various groups. The dispute has been discussed in the media and in some academic works as an identity issue of the ‘Kashmiri Muslims’ versus the Indian state, in which Kashmiri Muslims (especially Sunnis) from the Valley are singled out as the source of dissent.[[44]](#endnote-44) Instead of acknowledging that the Kashmir issue extends beyond the Kashmir Valley and the LoC, a number of scholars have framed the problem within the confines of the state by recognizing the failure of the Indian state to address Kashmiri nationalism.[[45]](#endnote-45) Framed in this way, the representation of the conflict ignores a more complex and interactive understanding of these societies based on everyday experience. Some anthropological works on specific groups in various parts of the disputed territories have highlighted aspects of agency and structure that are neglected in broader political and sociological studies and which show the relational and interactive dimension examined here.[[46]](#endnote-46) In other words, the conflict in the Kashmir Valley and the political context of those in AJK, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Ladakh are interrelated by the dynamics associated with (that is, the figuration of) the border.

There is little doubt that the conflict that erupted in the Kashmir Valley in 1989 was initiated by organizations whose members were Muslims, and that many people (primarily youths from mostly lower-middle class backgrounds) crossed the LoC to receive training in AJK and other parts of Pakistan and then returned to the Valley to launch attacks against the ‘Indian enemy’, personified as those with certain posts in the administration, government positions, and those who openly displayed pro-Indian views.[[47]](#endnote-47) Their aim was to free Kashmir from India, but the climate of chaos also created an opportunity to settle personal accounts and vendettas, leading to a less coherent view of the ‘movement’.[[48]](#endnote-48) In an interview in the Kashmir Valley with a middle-aged woman who was active in support of the armed struggle by providing logistical support to the militants, she narrated the early 1990s rape and killing of a young female journalist of Kashmir state TV by a well-known militant of Hizbul al-Muhajideen. She mentioned his name while showing me the photograph of the dead woman. After a moment of silence, which I interpreted as reflection, she finally said: ‘These things also happened. It is true. There was chaos and people used the opportunity to do other things.’[[49]](#endnote-49) Within the general climate of violence, Kashmiri Pandits became a particular target because they were the educated class, had better positions in the administration, and were seen as more sympathetic to India. Between 80 and 90 percent of Pandits abandoned the Valley in the early 1990s, many because of fear and threats, but the circumstances surrounding this exodus or ‘migration’, as it is usually referred to, are still the subject of much debate by scholars working on Kashmir, as it is linked with the identitarian character of the conflict.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Former militants—members of JKLF and Hizbul Muhajideen—and the families of dead militants whom I interviewed narrated their activism (and that of their sons and brothers) using political arguments. They explained their discontent with the political system at the time—specifically mentioning corruption and the rigging of the elections—and the illegitimacy of ‘Indian rule’, since people did not get the opportunity to decide in a plebiscite to be part of India, as required by the UN resolutions. This notwithstanding, in some cases an individual’s involvement in militancy was through networks of friends and neighbours without any apparent significant political mobilization (‘he joined because the others did’). During these interviews, there was never any specific form of hatred directed toward any other religious group in the Valley. However, in meetings in Srinagar with more educated and politically mobilized men—university professors, members of NGOs, US migrant returnees, lawyers, and nationalist politicians—the situation of the Pandits was referred to with a sense of embarrassment and guilt but also explained within the broader context of general violence, in which people had to fend for themselves. It was not Muslims targeting Hindus, but also targeting other Muslims. In this respect, the respondents emphasized the political question instead of ethnic or religious ascriptions. In fact, as a reaction to my questions about the Pandits, a few of them replied that the Sikhs from the Valley and other Hindus did stay during the conflict. A tentative explanation for this could be that the Pandits enjoyed more prominent positions in the public sector than did the Sikhs and other minorities. In interviews in Srinagar, three Sikh men in their mid-fifties acknowledged having been threatened by Muslims during the conflict, but in one case this was more a kind of extortion due to the fact, he explained, that his business (the distribution of gas cylinders) was doing very well at the time. All three of them, whose families had been settled in the Valley for more than a hundred years, identified as Kashmiris.

These views emphasize the relative importance of the political issue compared to identity arguments, but also provide a reflection on the political context which, because of the conflict, is difficult to investigate. Following these accounts, those who revolted in the Valley did so because they felt excluded from the state system—due to a manipulated electoral system and atrophied administration—in which a class element was also present, but also because they shared ideas and meanings about their own place, the Valley, that were framed as part of a historical democratic struggle that questioned the boundaries of the Indian state’s rule over them. The politics of belonging in the Kashmir Valley can not be understood by only analysing relations between religious and cultural groups. The broader figuration of boundary drawing and maintenance by the Indian and Pakistani post-colonial states must also be considered, including the impacts on people’s lives, and the inability of those states to mould the social diversity of the area into a political subjecthood.

The research findings from the various locations of the Kashmir borderland also show evidence of the incapacity of the interviewees to refer to or speak for a community of people or a specific territory and their difficulty in politically articulating their views. Even in the Kashmir Valley, where the idea of forming an independent state or merging the region with Pakistan is openly defended by various organizations, respondents were not able to express what kind of polity they envisioned and which territories would be part of it—except for those who favoured Kashmir remaining in India. Most of the answers about the future of the region were about the need to decide (acknowledged in UN resolutions), since Kashmir is disputed. Yet, interviewees in the Kashmir Valley were confused about whether their need to decide should also encompass the Pakistani territories, Ladakh, and Jammu, and most were worried about their own living conditions, which had been marked by a long period of violence and militarization.

The figuration formed by the LoC is characterized by the ambivalent position of the various actors and groups as citizens of India and Pakistan and their attempts to articulate claims to places as modes of overcoming their present situation within the restricted political context. The emergence of alternative forms of identification—apart from the more articulated nationalism in the Kashmir Valley with its openly anti-Indian stance—is the result of claims to be or become something that transcends the existing borders within the narrow political space. This is the case in the revival of Tibetan culture in Baltistan and probably, though less examined in my fieldwork, the transborder identification of Pahari-speaking groups in AJK. In this sense, the politics of belonging concerns the study of these articulations, their motivations, the moment and context in which they appear and gain significance, and their aims.

The study of the politics of belonging also implies reflecting on the political space, which connects to debates about the changing state space and sovereignty at a more abstract level. This has been mainly examined concerning the case of migrants and diasporic groups in West European and North American contexts, during debates on multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, but there has been little reflection in other contexts.[[51]](#endnote-51) Within the umbrella question posed by inquiries of belonging—how can we live together?—it is also necessary to ask under which conditions we can live together.

Again Balibar’s works on the relationship of borders and citizenship provide interesting insights.[[52]](#endnote-52) He observes territorialization and deterritorialization processes that involve the changing nature of state, with a particular focus on the European experience, and notes that, while the state form is no longer, if it ever was, able to respond to the challenges emanating from above (globalization processes) and from below (redistributive policies and social inequalities), there is still a continuous reproduction of the state form. Balibar takes the particular case of the European Union as a supra-state entity and seeks to answer the question of how and under which conditions people can live together in this borderland territory. In fact, it is this model of a borderland that he proposes as a way to acknowledge the existing internal diversity in a political space ‘imagined in terms of overlapping open regions.’[[53]](#endnote-53) The borderland model strongly resonates with the understanding of belonging, and the politics of belonging in particular, examined in this book. In this understanding, belonging, as expressed in the Kashmir border territories, is about the ambivalence of neither being ‘in’ nor ‘out’ (for example, being legally part of the dispute and not feeling part of it) and characterizes a state somewhere between non-being (as not-belonging or the denial to belong) and being a multiplicity of things (depending on the circumstances). In this regard, the Kashmir borderland already exists, as do other borderlands in the world, and the politics of belonging is the channel through which it becomes recognizable.

The notion of belonging, understood as the relationship of ‘being’ and attachment to a ‘place’ and exemplified in Ahmed’s narration, is a useful analytical tool for examining issues of displacement and recognition of groups caught in disputed borders because it raises questions about the ways these groups are bordered as part of a wider structure. Belonging shares an intimate relationship with identity but questions the latter’s intensity (or cohesion), since articulations of belonging emphasize social and territorial interactions irrespective of existing borders. These articulations embody a translocal and transnational experience, thus demonstrating cosmopolitan views, and draw attention to the context and circumstances in which they operate. Moreover, the exploration of issues of belonging represents an epistemological alternative when it is not possible to ask about aspects of identity, or when these are the source of great contestation. In this regard, claiming belonging implies a search for recognition that contests the existing political space and its territorial dimension.

The analysis of the politics of belonging—exemplified in the Kashmir dispute and the claims of various groups to relate to other places irrespective of the border—makes a hybrid form of territoriality re-emerge, in what Balibar aptly describes as the borderland. Borderlands such as Kashmir already exist in other parts of the world and the politics of belonging refers to struggles about their political articulation. To understand the Kashmir conflict from the borderland, as shown throughout this book, implies taking people’s views into account, partly to challenge larger narratives of the dispute in relation to their manifestations in place, and partly to grasp the opportunities for thinking of more inclusive spaces.

1. Haesbert, *Desterritorialización*, 284, 300. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In identifying understandings of the dispute, I refer to the implications of drawing assumptions about the conflict through employing categories such as ‘Ladakhis’, ‘Kargilis’, ‘Mirpuris’, ‘Kashmiris’, and so on, which are understood as more or less established collectivities living in specific locations. I do not ignore that boundary-drawing has activated and articulated identities in specific ways. My interest is to show that people living in these disputed territories have a more dynamic and plural relationship in dealing with each other and relating to the various locations than the one provided by identity explanations. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On cosmopolitanism, see Vertovec and Cohen, *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*, 1−22. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Bonnett, *Off the Map*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Bigo, ‘The Möbius ribbon’, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. On political transformations in Gilgit-Baltistan since Partition, see Chapter 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Mato Bouzas, ‘Mixed legacies’. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. By ‘figuration’, I refer to the concept used by Norbert Elias to express that there is no such thing as an individual separated from society and that individuals are the product of (and are constrained by) their interactions within a network of relations. Elias, *What is Sociology?*, 128–133. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Hedetoft and Hjort, *The Postnational Self*; Youkhana, ‘A conceptual shift’; Yuval-Davies and Stoetzler, ‘Imagined boundaries’; Yuval-Davies, Sannabiran, and Vieten, *Situated Politics*; Anthias, ‘Thinking through the lens’. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Anthias, ‘Thinking through the lens’, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Youkhana, ‘A conceptual shift’, 16–19. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. I refer to the fact that identity explanations may obfuscate other important issues that are connected to the question of access to resources (broadly understood). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Yuval-Davies, ‘Belonging and the politics’, 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Rancière, *La Mésentente*, 169–185. For a more contextualized understanding of the term, see Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière,* 41–45. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Hedetoft and Hjort, *Postnational self*, viii–x. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Bauman, *Identity: Conversations,*76–80. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Brown, ‘Borders and identity’, 119; Brubaker, ‘Without ethnic groups’, 164, also see the extended version by the same author, *Ethnicity without Ethnic Group*s, 10−20. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Brubaker, ‘Without ethnic groups’, 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Singh, ‘Cultural conflict’, 344–346. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Singh, ‘Cultural conflict’, 344–346. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For example, one of my respondents admitted going to demonstrations in support of the nationalist cause because of pressure from the neighbourhood. Criticism of the nationalist organizations is also present, for example, the idea that the nationalist leaders receive money from the Pakistani intelligence agencies. At the time of the research, for example, there were rumors (and jokes) circulating in the city of Srinagar regarding the ongoing unrest caused by the ‘stone pelting’ movement (throwing stones at the paramilitary forces after Friday prayers) by saying that youngsters involved were paid by the JeI. This was a critique of JeI. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See, for example, Wirsing, *Kashmir in the Shadow,* 157. I refer to the fact that arguments about the Kashmir dispute, especially on the conflict in the Kashmir Valley, are articulated around the question of the ‘Muslimness’ of Kashmiris. This implies the idealization of a Muslim community as part of a common shared Kashmiri identity with non-Muslims, *Kashmiriyat*, or its more problematic consideration as a separate group (identity) as part of a ‘melting pot’ (underlining the existence of many identities in Kashmir). The latter implies that Kashmiri Muslims of the Valley are troublesome in their political demands because their mobilization also exacerbates the demands from other groups. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For more detail, see Kaur, *Political Awakening*, 26–35; Rai, *Hindu Rulers,* 252–253. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Interview, Srinagar, 3 May 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. This can be seen through the journalistic account of a kidnapping of foreigners in the Kashmir Valley in 1995, Levy and Scott-Clark, *The Meadow*. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Barth*, Ethnic Groups*. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Scott, *The Art of Not Being*,280–281 and 329. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. See the discussion by Bottici on Hanna Arendt’s understanding of imagination. Bottici, *Imaginal Politics*, 96–98. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Hong, ‘Liminality and resistance’. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Pfaff-Czarnecka, ‘Multiple Belonging’, 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Balibar, ‘Uprisings’. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Balibar, ‘The “Impossible”’, 437. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Balibar, ‘The “Impossible”’, 441. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Although those living on the Indian side are considered citizens of India, their political rights are very restricted. See Mato Bouzas, ‘Securitization and development’, 90–95; Reader, *Pilgrimage,* 42. See also Junaid, ‘Peace, tourism’. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Although Balibar does not explicitly use the term ‘cosmopolitanism from below’, he is pointing to this idea in the practices of citizenship. In the article ‘Uprisings’, he discusses cosmopolitanism in relation to the national frame (the French state). Kurasawa defines a ‘cosmopolitanism from below’ as a ‘transnational mode of practice’ and he emphasizes public discourse and ‘social and political oriented forms of global social action.’ ‘A Cosmopolitanism from Below’, 234. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Calhoun, ‘Class consciousness’. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Title of the spiritual leader in the Kashmir Valley who represents the traditional form of Islam in Kashmir, which is connected to the Iranian influences of the first preachers. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Interview, Srinagar, 12 July 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. My use of the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ is not in the strict philosophical sense. Rather, it is employed to highlight the memories (that people still evoke) of these places as crossroads of influences exemplified in the continuing social plurality and experiences of multilingualism. Through the re-enactment of ties across the borders, those involved try to re-appropriate these past legacies based on their condition of being members of the wider world. This understanding does not contradict the political argument that many Kashmiris in the Valley seek to differentiate themselves from India and Pakistan (by creating a border). Many minority groups in the world searching for self-determination have based their claims on universal values of justice and solidarity. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Pffaf-Czarnecka and Toffin, *The Politics of Belonging*, xxii. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Yuval-Davies, ‘Belonging and the politics’, 197–214, 205. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Migdal, *Boundaries and Belonging*,15–16. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Yuval-Davies, ‘Belonging and the politics’; Anthias, ‘Translocational belonging’. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Wirsing, *Kashmir in the Shadow,* Ch. 3; Behera, *Demystifying Kashmir*, 104–44. Also see the most recent and controversial ‘Letter to Kashmiri Youth’ by the popular author Chetan Bhagat. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Among others: Behera, *State, Identity*; Sumantra Bose, *Roots of Conflict*, 164−165. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. For example, Mona Bhan, *Counterinsurgency*; Robinson, *Body of Victim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. I refer here to the religious adscription, not to the degree of religious mobilization. This is based on the fact that, according to the 2011 census of India, Muslims constitute 68.31 percent of the population of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the majority living in the Kashmir Valley. Moreover, in my interviews with militants and the families of militants (in Srinagar and Baramulla area), I noted that all of them were brought up in Muslim cultural traditions. A Sikh interviewee from Srinagar mentioned that Sikhs have been involved in militancy in the southern part of the Valley, but I never met a Sikh (former) militant. In my interviews I never asked specifically for religious beliefs; I asked about the youths’ motivations to cross the LoC and engage in violent activities. Religious reasons were never mentioned in response to this question. Widmalm, *Kashmir in Comparative* 131−132; Bose, *Roots of Conflict*, 95–96. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. I employ this term to refer to the political and armed popular movement in the Kashmir Valley, as this was normally used by my interviewees. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Interview, Srinagar, 15 May 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. For a recent published anthropological work on the displaced Pandit communities in Jammu see Datta, *Uncertain Ground*, 52–67. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. See Calhoun’s reflection on cosmopolitanism as ‘a discourse centered in a Western view of the world’ while the non-West is constantly approached through *tradition.* ‘Class consciousness’, 873–874. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Balibar, ‘Europe as borderland’, and also from the same author, ‘The “Impossible”’. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Balibar, ‘Europe as borderland’, 210. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)