

***Undoing Border Imperialism* by Harsha Walia**

Lou Dear | Journal: [General Issue \[10\]](#) | [Issues](#) | [Reviews](#) | Sep 2014

Review: Harsha Walia (2012) *Undoing Border Imperialism*, Oakland CA, Edinburgh, Washington DC: AK Press / Institute for Anarchist Studies. 340 pp. ISBN-13: 9781849351348

On the 2nd May 2014, approximately 150 detainees at Harmondsworth Immigration Detention Centre near London Heathrow – one of Europe’s largest – went on mass hunger strike to protest against the fast-track asylum system, inadequate health care, unfair bureaucratic processes and criminalisation. Protestors occupied the main courtyard and asked for assistance to get their message out to the world. One man had already been on hunger strike for 67 days at the time of the protest. Answering this call for support, the Unity Centre organised a solidarity protest at Dungavel Immigration Removal Centre just outside Glasgow. The protest inside Harmondsworth and the solidarity that followed (in Glasgow and across the country) played a small part in resisting the idea that human beings should ever be detained, criminalised and considered ‘illegal’ for emigrating or seeking asylum.

Rich with ten years’ experience from organising with No One Is Illegal (NOII) in the Indigenous Coast Salish territory (Vancouver, Canada) and other anti-racist, migrant justice, Indigenous solidarity, feminist, anti-imperialist and Palestine solidarity movements, Walia’s *Undoing Border Imperialism* has much to offer those involved in resistance to, and those struggling within and against, imperial borders. Sharing of this kind is particularly welcome at this time, as far-right racist parties, espousing anti-immigrant rhetoric, gain political ground and an imminent “colossal humanitarian disaster” has been declared by the United Nations with regard to migration to Europe.^[1]

In an interview with the feminist wire, Walia said,

“The primary audience for the book was people involved in movement building... people interested and engaged with migrant justice efforts, but also broader than that because the aim of the book is to frame migrant issues within an expansive politics – within an anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and anti-oppressive framework.”^[2]

The reception of the book amongst activists has been significant, with reviews appearing in the feminist wire, *Unsettling America*, *Truthout*, *Upside Down World*, *The Mainlander*, and beyond.

“This book belongs in every wannabe revolutionary’s war backpack. I addictively jumped all over its contents: a radical mixtape of ancestral wisdoms to present-day-grounded organizers theorizing about their own experiences. A must for me is Walia’s decision to infuse this volume’s fight against border imperialism, white supremacy, and empire with the vulnerability of her own personal narrative. This book is a breath of fresh air and offers an urgently needed movement-based praxis. *Undoing Border Imperialism* is too hot to be sitting on bookshelves; it will help make the revolution.” —Ashanti Alston, Black Panther elder and former political prisoner

Walia, her publishers and supporters are actively ensuring that *Undoing Border Imperialism* leaves bookshelves and enters backpacks. Fifteen copies of the book have been donated to Glasgow, for distribution in university, college and community libraries, prisons, and community support and solidarity organisations.

The book is also a significant contribution to theory: academic, movement based, and experiential. Walia recognises that “societal structures” privilege academic theory, but suggests all three theoretical modes are important, “Together these forms help us to understand systematic injustice from different angles, and empower us to take action against authoritarian and oppressive regimes” (p. 16). As such, the book is also a resource for academics, particularly those engaged in postcolonial, queer, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist critique. In methodology, form, structure, content, style, and emotional register, *Undoing Border Imperialism* makes a contribution to an evolving decolonial praxis that is generated at the grassroots and rendered by, amongst others, academics.

Chapter one “What Is Border Imperialism?” draws on an intersectional pedagogy of critical race theory, feminist studies, Marxist analysis and poststructuralism. Walia brings together a conceptual framework which works towards undoing the physical and conceptual borders which “enforce a global system of apartheid” (Walia, p. 2). Chapter two “Cartography of NOII” charts NOII’s response – as an anticapitalist, anticolonial and antiracist migrant justice movement – to border imperialism; through direct action support work, challenging migrant legal status requirements, Indigenous solidarity, and collaboration with anticapitalist groups. Chapters three and four “Overgrowing Hegemony: Grassroots Theory” and “Waves of Resistance Roundtable” rely on social movement theory, and knowledge generated from the grassroots. Chapter five “Journeys toward Decolonization” discusses “decolonization as a liberatory and prefigurative framework aimed at dismantling the structures of border imperialism, settler colonialism, empire, capitalism and oppression, whilst also being a generative praxis that creates the condition to grow and recenter alternatives to our current socioeconomic system” (Walia, p. 19).

The theoretical framework deployed by Walia is designed to contest and reimagine the dominant discourse around borders and migration. Undoing the Capitalist/Patriarchal/Imperial move to innocence, which frames Western nations as generous refuges – via asylum and welfare – erasing the reality of asymmetrical power relations in a neo-colonial world order, which create, in the words of Sylvia Wynter, the “damned archipelagos of the Poor”.^[3] Such cleansing is necessary to perpetuate “the matrix of racialised empire and neoliberal capital” (Walia, p.75). The nexus of Walia’s retelling – the four structuring elements of border imperialism – are: the mass displacement of poor communities combined with the securitization of physical borders designed to contain and control; the criminalization of migration, and simultaneous creation of ‘alien’ or ‘illegal’ as a category of person; a racialized hierarchy of citizenship governing who is considered ‘legitimate’ in a nation state; and the state-mediated exploitation of migrant labour by capitalist interests (Walia, p.5). Walia acknowledges many other theorists engaged in such contesting and reimagining, notably bell hooks, Andrea Smith, Angela Davis, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Walia’s contribution can also be productively located alongside thinkers ‘decolonizing’ the social, cultural and academic apparatuses at the theoretical level, like, for example, Sylvia Wynter and Walter D. Mignolo.

Those involved in decolonial theorising have focused on the “democratization of epistemology”; building on Anzaldúa’s border thinking, and legitimizing many ways of

thinking, beyond the pretence of a singular, universal way of understanding the world and version of events.^[4] In *Undoing Border Imperialism* we can see this approach – derived from Walia’s personal experience, the traditions she situates herself within, and horizontal organising praxis – as a methodological approach, a means to analyse, and produce knowledge and understanding. The most obvious example of this is the fifteen authors of chapter four, the heart of the book, in which a range of migrant justice activists share their experiences in organising. In addition to this Walia’s own words are interspersed with narrative, poetics and graphic art authored by racialized and predominantly women activists, “as a political act” (Walia, p. 20). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, an Indigenous Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, describes storytelling as:

“a lens through which we can envision our way out of cognitive imperialism, where we can create models and mirrors where none existed, and where we can experience the spaces of freedom and justice.” (Walia, p.19)

In method, form and structure Walia’s contribution – the *politics* of her knowledge production – offers insights into an academic discourse of postcolonial or decolonial thinking which risks replicating problematic subjectivities, by appropriating or fetishizing voices from the borders; subaltern or liminal perspectives. This is an issue which has been raised by, amongst others, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, when she cautioned against the hegemonic appropriation of the term ‘subaltern’.^[5] Walia’s book performs its democratic intentions through the lived experience of its multiple authors, actively generating principles *from* social movements, rather than imposing principles *on* them (p. 18).

The chapter “Journeys toward Decolonization” is particularly strong, and is useful to anyone, activist or academic, who considers using the term ‘decolonization’. As the term becomes ever more in vogue in the academy, in the context of ongoing settler colonialism, Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang remind us of the risk attached to using decolonization as a metaphor because “it recentres whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future.”^[6] Walia’s answer to this, in part, is that on her terms, paradoxically, decolonization does not presume itself to be a new concept, but it is a prefigurative practice (p. 250). It is a process rather than a goal.

“Decolonization is more than a struggle against power and control; it is also the imagining and generating of alternative institutions and relations [...] resistance that is responsive to dismantling current systems of colonial empire and systematic hierarchy, while also prefiguring societies based on equity, mutual aid, and self-determination [...] a fundamental reorientation of ourselves, our movements, and our communities to think and act with intentionality, creativity, militancy, humility, and above all, a deep sense of responsibility and reciprocity” (Walia, p. 249).

In her own context, she takes Indigenous self-determination, expressed collectively, as a starting point; demanding “responsible allyship” (Walia, p. 273). Thinking about Indigenous struggles globally, she focuses on defense of land and the intersecting prerogatives of social, environmental and economic justice. Drawing on Andrea Smith, who authors the foreword to the book, we are encouraged “not to individualize Indigenous struggles but to see that genocide and colonization are part of a larger global framework of domination” (Walia, p.257).

In addition to decolonizing the structures of colonialism, Walia discusses decolonizing social movements and social relations. Around the politics of healing and emotional justice – collective liberatory care based on the wellbeing of the community, cultivating empathy and relationships beyond capitalism – she returns again and again to the experience of being human. In the words of Joaquin Cienfuegos, Native Youth Movement Member, “We have to learn to be human again; this battle is one where we not only decolonize ourselves and our minds, but decolonize our condition” (Walia, p.256), recalling the tradition of radical humanists engaged in anticolonial struggle, including Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter, those who push beyond Man, towards the human. In Walia, it is possible to see the prefigurative beginnings of the reclamation of the human.

“Making sense of my own life, marked by countless state borders and marred by innumerable systemic barriers, has been a process of decolonization. Lacking full legal status as a result of border imperialism coupled with daily humiliations as a woman of color has meant decades of feeling expendable, powerless, ashamed, fragmented, inadequate, tentative, and quite literally crazy. My journey to a place of self-actualization and self-affirmation, as well as responsible allyship where I am complicit in other systems of oppression such as settler colonialism locally and Western militarism globally, has been a direct result of my involvement in the overlapping processes of political struggle against injustice and building community among allies and comrades” (Walia, p. 273).

Notes

1. Harriet Sherwood, Helena Smith, Lizzy Davis, Harriet Grant, “Europe faces ‘colossal humanitarian catastrophe’ of refugees dying at sea”, *The Guardian*, June 2, 2014. [\[↑\]](#)
2. Erin Durban-Albrecht, *An Interview with Harsha Walia*, the feminist wire, March, 2014. [\[↑\]](#)
3. Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,” *The New Centennial Review*, 3:3 (2003). [\[↑\]](#)
4. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 81. [\[↑\]](#)
5. Leon De Kock, “Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 23:3 (1992): accessed June 4, 2014. [\[↑\]](#)
6. Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1. 1 (2012), pp.1-40. [\[↑\]](#)

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