SOFTWARE & TECH

Harsha Walia Undoing Border Imperialism

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Introduction: Rethinking Borders Through the Lens of Harsha Walia

In an era defined by unprecedented human migration, climate displacement, and stark geopolitical inequality, few voices have cut through the noise as incisively as **Harsha Walia**. As a leading organizer, writer, and legal advocate, Walia has reshaped how we understand the modern border—not as a natural or neutral line on a map, but as a violent technology of control. Her influential work, particularly the concept of **undoing border imperialism**, challenges readers to recognize that migration restrictions are not simply about national security, but are deeply entangled with capitalism, colonialism, and racial oppression. This article explores the core arguments of Harsha Walia's framework, examining why **undoing border imperialism**is essential for anyone committed to genuine justice and liberation. We will unpack the historical roots of border control, connect it to contemporary struggles, and consider what it truly means to build a world where freedom of movement is a reality for all.

Who Is Harsha Walia? A Brief Introduction

Before diving into the theoretical depths of **Harsha Walia undoing border imperialism**, it is important to understand the person behind the ideas. Harsha Walia is a South Asian American writer, lawyer, and community organizer based in what is currently known as Canada. Her work spans decades of frontline activism with migrant justice groups, Indigenous solidarity movements, and anti-capitalist struggles. She is the author of the critically acclaimed book *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*, as well as the earlier work *Undoing Border Imperialism*, which has become a foundational text for activists and scholars alike.

Walia's analysis does not emerge from an academic ivory tower. It is forged in the trenches of direct action—accompanying migrants to detention hearings, organizing against deportations, and standing in solidarity with Indigenous land defenders. This lived experience gives her writing a rare urgency and moral clarity. When Walia speaks about **undoing border imperialism**, she is not proposing a vague ideal; she is articulating a practical, militant strategy for dismantling the systems that criminalize movement and entrench inequality.

Defining Border Imperialism: The Core Argument

To understand why **undoing border imperialism**is such a powerful call to action, we must first grasp what Walia means by "border imperialism." For Walia, borders are not passive geographical markers. They are active, dynamic instruments of power that serve several interlocking functions:

- Labor Control: Borders regulate who can work, under what conditions, and for what wages. By restricting legal migration, states create a pool of undocumented workers who are vulnerable to exploitation, driving down

wages and undermining labor rights for everyone.

- Racial Hierarchies: Border enforcement is inherently racialized. It targets people from the Global South—Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities—while facilitating the movement of white travelers and investors. This reinforces a global color line.
- Capital Accumulation: The border security industry is itself a lucrative business. From surveillance technology to private detention centers, corporations profit handsomely from the militarization of migration.
- Imperial Geopolitics: Borders are a direct legacy of colonialism. European powers carved up Africa, Asia, and the Americas, drawing lines that divided families, disrupted trade routes, and imposed alien governance structures. Today's border regime perpetuates these colonial logics.

In this framework, the border is not a shield protecting a nation; it is a weapon wielded by the powerful against the vulnerable. The call for **Harsha Walia undoing border imperialism** is therefore a call to recognize that migration justice is inseparable from broader struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy.

The Historical Roots of Border Control

Colonial Origins and the Invention of Passports

One of the most compelling aspects of Walia's analysis is her historical grounding. She demonstrates that the modern passport and visa system did not emerge organically; it was invented to serve specific imperial interests. The first widespread use of passports in the early 20th century was not to manage immigration, but to track "undesirable" people within empires—particularly colonial subjects, laborers, and political dissidents.

Walia traces how the British Empire used pass laws to control the movement of Indian indentured laborers. Similarly, the United States developed its early immigration apparatus to exclude Chinese laborers after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. These were not isolated incidents but part of a global pattern. The history of border control is a history of racial exclusion, labor coercion, and imperial domination. Recognizing this lineage is essential for **undoing border imperialism** today.

The End of the Cold War and the Rise of Fortress Europe

Walia also examines how the post-Cold War era accelerated border militarization. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the West needed a new enemy. Migrants and refugees from the Global South increasingly filled that role. The 1990s saw the rise of "Fortress Europe," with its harmonized visa policies, externalized border controls, and deadly deterrents like the Mediterranean migration route. In the United States, Operation Gatekeeper and similar initiatives militarized the US-Mexico border, pushing migrants into more dangerous terrain.

This era also saw the expansion of detention and deportation regimes. Immigrant detention went from a relatively rare administrative measure to a multi-billion-dollar industry. The prison-industrial complex merged with the border-industrial complex. For Walia, this is no accident. **Undoing border imperialism** requires understanding how these systems feed each other, creating a carceral archipelago that traps millions of people in legal limbo.

Key Themes in Harsha Walia's Work

No One Is Illegal: Beyond the "Good Migrant" Narrative

A central pillar of Walia's activism and writing is the slogan "No One Is Illegal." This is not merely a provocative statement; it is a principled rejection of the very categories of "legal" and "illegal" migration. Walia argues that the distinction between a "good" documented migrant and a "bad" undocumented migrant is a deliberate tactic of divide and rule. It pits communities against each other and legitimizes the violence of deportation against a supposedly undeserving few.

However, Walia pushes even further. She critiques the tendency within some progressive circles to advocate

only for "dreamers" or "essential workers" while leaving the rest of the migrant population vulnerable.

True **undoing border imperialism** means defending everyone's right to move and stay—regardless of their paperwork, employment status, or perceived "contribution" to the economy. It means rejecting the state's power to sort people into categories of worthiness.

Borders Are Everywhere: Internal Enforcement and Everyday Life

Another crucial insight from Walia is that borders are not only at the physical frontier. They extend inward, permeating everyday life. Internal checkpoints, workplace raids, public benefits restrictions, and cooperation between local police and federal immigration enforcement create a climate of fear that disciplines entire communities. In many countries, drivers' licenses, bank accounts, and even library cards have become de facto border checkpoints.

This internalization of the border means that **undoing border imperialism** requires a multi-front struggle. It is not enough to protest at the border wall; activists must also challenge local ordinances, sanctuary city policies (and their limits), and the everyday bureaucratic violence that makes life unlivable for migrants. Walia insists that we must build communities of genuine sanctuary, not just symbolic ones.

Solidarity Beyond Saviors: Indigenous and Migrant Alliances

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Walia's framework is her insistence on the centrality of Indigenous solidarity. She argues that the nation-state system itself is built on stolen Indigenous land. The border is a colonial imposition that divides Indigenous nations—the US-Mexico border, for example, cuts through the territories of the Tohono O'odham, the Yaqui, and many other peoples.

For Walia, genuine migration justice cannot be achieved by asking the settler state to be more welcoming. Instead, it requires building alliances between migrants and Indigenous communities, grounded in a shared opposition to colonialism and capitalism. This means supporting land back movements, honoring treaties, and recognizing that the freedom to move must be accompanied by the freedom to belong—to a place, a community, and a land base that has not been stolen.

Harsha Walia undoing border imperialism is therefore not a narrow "immigration reform" agenda. It is a revolutionary vision that connects the struggle for migrant justice to the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty, racial justice, and ecological survival.

Practical Strategies for Undoing Border Imperialism

Community-Based Defense: Beyond Legal Services

Walia is deeply critical of the non-profit industrial complex that often substitutes advocacy for organizing. She advocates for community-based defense networks that are led by directly affected people. This includes rapid response teams to prevent deportations, accompaniment programs for people with pending cases, and mutual aid networks that provide material support regardless of immigration status.

These strategies embody the principle that **undoing border imperialism** is not something that lawyers or academics do on behalf of others. It is something that communities do together, through collective action and solidarity.

Building Abolitionist Infrastructure

If the border is part of a broader carceral system, then resistance must be abolitionist in character. Walia calls for the abolition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Border Patrol, the closure of detention centers, and the decriminalization of migration entirely. But abolition is not just about tearing down; it is about building up. It involves creating alternative systems of community safety, housing, healthcare, and economic support that do not depend on exclusion or punishment.

This is a long-term project, but Walia points to inspiring examples around the world: migrant cooperatives in Greece, sanctuary churches in the United States, and grassroots networks that ferry people across borders outside of state control. These experiments in prefigurative politics show that undoing border imperialism is already underway.

Challenging the Climate Migration Narrative

Finally, Walia offers a sharp critique of how climate change is being used to justify new forms of border control. The dominant narrative presents climate migration as a crisis to be managed—through more surveillance, more detention, and more selective admissions of "deserving" climate refugees. Walia counters that climate change is a direct result of the same capitalist and imperialist systems that produce border violence. The countries most responsible for emissions are the ones fortifying their borders against those who are displaced.

True **undoing border imperialism** in the climate era means demanding climate reparations, supporting the right of everyone to stay in their homes if they choose, and ensuring that migration is a choice, not a death sentence. It means recognizing that the fight to save the planet and the fight to free movement are the same fight.

Critiques and Conversations: Engaging with Walia's Work

No intellectual framework is without its critics, and Walia's work has generated important debates. Some have argued that her focus on state violence can obscure the agency and resilience of migrant communities. Others have questioned whether the call to abolish all borders is strategically wise in the short term, given the political realities of rising xenophobia and far-right nationalism.

Walia engages with these critiques thoughtfully. She acknowledges that abolition is a horizon, not an immediate demand, and that there are tactical reasons to support certain reforms—such as stopping a particular deportation or expanding legal aid—without losing sight of the larger goal. What she resists is the temptation to let reforms substitute for transformation. The conversation around **undoing border imperialism** is ongoing, and it is enriched by these debates.

Conclusion: The Urgency of Undoing Border Imperialism

Harsha Walia's work arrives at a moment of profound crisis and possibility. As walls go up, detention camps proliferate, and people continue to die at borders around the world, the need for a clear, principled, and strategic analysis has never been greater. **Harsha Walia undoing border imperialism** offers precisely that: a framework that connects the dots between migration, capitalism, colonialism, and racial violence, while pointing toward a path of genuine liberation.

Undoing border imperialism is not a slogan. It is a practice. It means showing up at the courthouse, the detention center, and the community meeting. It means learning the history of the land you are on and the people who were displaced. It means refusing to accept the state's categories of who belongs and who does not. It means building relationships of trust and solidarity across

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