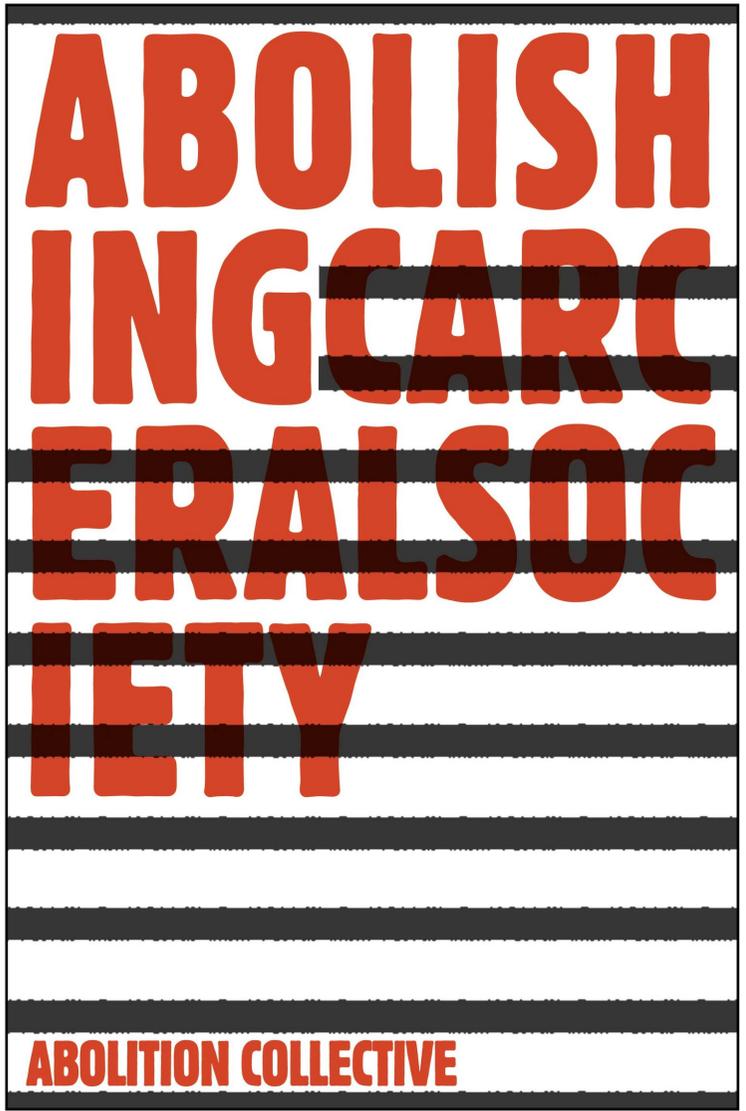


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DISMANTLE AND TRANSFORM: ON ABOLITION, DECOLONIZATION, AND INSURGENT POLITICS

A conversation between Harsha Walia and Andrew Dilts

Andrew Dilts (AD): I want to start by asking about “No One is Illegal” and your involvement with it.¹ You talk about this a lot in your book, *Undoing Border Imperialism* (AK Press, 2013). For people who haven’t read the book, could you explain how you became involved with that organization?

Harsha Walia (HW): My work around migrant justice is based on personal experiences and fifteen years as an organizer. I grew up in a family of migrants with an even longer history of displacement. Partition in South Asia was a very violent process. The colonially-imposed border between what is now known as India and Pakistan led to over fourteen million people being killed or displaced. It is known by the United Nations as one of the largest mass displacements and migrations in human history. And when I came to Turtle Island, I lived as a migrant for many years, part of it with precarious legal status. This familial history of displacement, migration, labor exploitation and race—all the issues discussed in the book—are very personal for me. So after 9/11 when we witnessed massive roundups, surveillance, increasing deportations, and new antimigrant and antiterror laws being passed, that became my entry point into organizing within the migrant justice movement and No One Is Illegal.

AD: I want to ask you about the proliferation of security check points and border check points, because in your analysis, you describe how the border does not exist at the exterior of any nation.

1. For more info on No One Is Illegal, see noii-van.resist.ca.

Is it right to say that borders are almost entirely *inside* of nations and that the production of illegal persons is happening not at historical or geographic borders but as a *practice* of bordering?

HW: The border extends far beyond the geographic border. The practice of bordering is being both internalized and externalized as power and modes of control are increasingly diffused. The border is externalized through interdiction, which is the interception of migrants before the border by disallowing migrants to board airplanes and making their journeys more perilous. In Europe, this outsourcing of border regimes has resulted in the drowning deaths of tens of thousands of migrants over the past decade.

The internalization of borders is happening in so-called public institutions—schools, hospitals, transit—that are operating as checkpoints and either denying migrants access and often acting as border guards to detain and report people to immigration authorities. The temporary foreign worker program also operates as a domesticated border and form of incarceration both literally and figuratively. Migrant workers often have their documents confiscated and are held captive to work under conditions of indentured servitude. For live-in caregivers in Canada, for example, historically Caribbean women and now Filipina women came to work as domestic workers and the rates of sexual violence are incredibly high because vulnerable migrant women are being forced to live with predominantly white middle-class employers. The internalized form of control and bordering that is inherent to such state-sanctioned indentured labor programs is the new template for global migration, or “managed migration” as the elites call it.

AD: I want to look deeper into the internal workings of an organization like NOII which is all volunteer-based. As you argue in the book, part of resisting the nonprofit industrial complex is trying to not fall into these traps of fundraising cycles where you lose power and self-determination. So one of the tensions that comes up a lot, however, is the expectation of doing a whole lot of labor without much (or any) compensation for it. How have you all navigated the tensions of making sure people can survive while they’re doing this work?

HW: It's something we definitely struggle with. There have been a few instances in the past where members in the collective didn't have full legal immigration status and weren't able to "legally" work, and so we put aside the little bit of money for those folks to be compensated for their labor in the collective. But we don't have any specific policy since we are not a formal nonprofit, and our collective members and capacity is constantly changing.

We also support through other forms of labor by, for example, always providing childcare or supporting each other emotionally in times of stress. So trying to build more resilient networks in everyday acts of living. NOII has no paid staff and we do have to find other ways to financially support themselves, which immensely affects our collective capacity. But the flipside of monetizing our labor is to strengthen relational forms of labor—by helping each other move, making meals when people are sick, supporting with childcare etc. We reduce our reliance on the state by relying on each other. Of course our capacities—both individual and institutional—to make this possible are incredibly limited and marginalized communities are constantly forced to be in contact with the state and its bureaucracies, whether it is the immigration system, prison, child apprehension system, food banks, welfare, courts, etc. It is imperfect and adhoc but I have immense respect for the intention and care of building community as a form of labor within political practice.

AD: In an interview you did with Glen Coulthard, you asked him a question about state engagement versus disengagement.² I want to ask you the same question: How do we determine when and how to turn away?

HW: I think the disengagement versus engagement dichotomy is false, just as the reform versus revolution debate is reductive. Even if our long-term vision is turned away from the state, in the short term we may have to engage with the state—things like dealing with the courts or calling the cops to address gender violence etc. Part of the reason someone may decide to rely on the police is

2. Interview available at rabble.ca.

because our community accountability mechanisms are dismal. I asked Glen that question because I don't think it's a simple answer. Despite my vision to disengage with the state, the reality is that I end up engaging with the state every day especially when supporting marginalized women.

I am not suggesting that engagement versus disengagement with the state is simply a temporal distinction, as many alternatives to the state do exist in the immediate. It is more of a practical and contextual consideration for me. The main principle I work around in these individual instances is the principle of self-determination. If I am supporting someone facing deportation or partner violence, what do they need? Are there effective alternatives to the state that exist that I can suggest or do they feel the need to engage with the state in order to reduce harm or to access safety?

AD: As a general answer that seems really helpful because that answer makes it concrete immediately in terms of specific needs and specific situations. And it pushes back on the traditional “reform versus revolution” version of the question. In prison abolition work, I hear the language of “reformist reforms” versus “non-reformist reforms” being used more and more, and I'm wondering if that language makes sense based on the concrete situations you're invoking here: a reform that reinforces the system versus a reform that requires a different system.

HW: Yes, I think so. Arguably every reform entrenches the power of the state because it gives the state the power to implement that reform. But from an ethical orientation towards emancipation, I think a guiding question on non-reformist reforms is: Is it increasing the possibility of freedom? In the context of detention centers and prisons, there are tangible differences between various kinds of reforms.

Locally, we are in the period of a state inquest after the tragic death of a Mexican migrant woman Lucia Vega Jimenez in immigration detention.³ There are now a number of reform-based

3. “Lucia Vega Jimenez found hanging in CBSA shower stall,” *CBC News*, Jan. 29, 2014, available at cbc.ca. See also, “NOII Statement: Inquest into Lucia Vega Jimenez Death in CBSA Custody,” Oct 7, 2014, available at noii-van.resist.ca.

recommendations on the table coming from legal organizations, NGO's and state-based agencies. Our allies and us put forward our vision for an end to all deportations and detentions, and then we supported those specific necessary reforms that detainees over the years have talked about that would increase their access to the outside world—for example, increased access to phones, computers, and legal advice.

Conversely, one of the proposed reforms that we did not support was a GPS electronic bracelet as an alternative to incarceration. This is forcing people to incarcerate their own body and their home becomes their cages. Another reform we opposed was more cameras in prisons. Even though it was pitched under the guise of “keeping detainees safe,” surveillance is less about safety and more about invasion of privacy and increased social control. So that was how we decided—is the reform increasing the possibility of freedom or is it incarceration and control in another form?

AD: Let me go straight into the book for a moment: one of the things that I really love about the book, and one of the reasons that I teach it too, is that every chapter of this book includes a series of narratives from individuals who are from racialized groups, and almost all are women-identified folks. In the beginning of the book, you call this a political act. So, first: what is it that you are thinking of as *politics*, and as *action*, such that the inclusion of those voices counts as a *political act*? And second: what does it mean in both the activism and the writing to place those voices at the center rather than at the periphery?

HW: Part of my hesitation in agreeing to write the book was the impact it would have on collective organizing. We know how harmful it is when one individual becomes seen as the “expert” voice of a movement, and writing is one of the key ways that happens. I wanted to be accountable to that concern as it is a legitimate political concern. At the same time, I am also aware of how we need to be writing and sharing our stories and movement histories, and to not cede that terrain of knowledge production

to others who often usurp or misrepresent our histories and theories.

The process of how to envision and write this book took longer than writing the book. From the beginning, I reached out to as many comrades as possible and including the narratives and roundtable was a deliberate effort to lift up movement as a collective. This action is also a political affirmation—movements can produce our own theory, enact group-centered space because there is no liberation in isolation, assess movement victories and challenges in a multitude of ways, and push against the competition and tokenism that often happens to and amongst racialized women by actively centering those voices throughout the entire book.

AD: How do you think about solidarity and allyship? Or, alternately, as described in “Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex,” about accomplices rather than allies?⁴

HW: I think allies and accomplices have become identities in and of themselves, when in fact they are meant to be verbs—to signify ways of being and of doing, of relationship and relationality. It is impossible for any one person to be “an ally” because we all carry multitudes of experiences and oppressions and privileges. Most people are simultaneously oppressed and simultaneously privileged, and even those are always specific and contextual.

My paid work is in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the country. Unsurprisingly, this is a disproportionately racialized neighborhood but there are many older cisgendered white men. A straight white cisgendered man who is homeless faces a harsher material reality than me on a daily basis—with minimal to no access to food, shelter, health care, or income. Reductively, one would say that I have class privilege in relationship to him. But it goes beyond that. Even taking into account that I might be able to count off more forms of oppression, the entirety of my material reality is more secure.

For me that is where intersectionality falls short; it has become

4. “Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex,” available at indigenouaction.org.

a static analysis and one of fixed categories that leads to oppressed/ally dichotomies. Anti-oppression analysis becomes rigid in its categorizations when the question becomes who is more oppressed, rather than engaging in a dialogue of *how* oppression, which is relational and contextual, is specifically manifesting. Oppression develops a strange quantifiable logic, a commodity that can be stocked up on. This isn't to say I don't believe in anti-oppression allyship, but rather that I question its reductionism in place of a fluid, contextual and relational practice.

Another example is within *No One Is Illegal*. We are a collective of mainly racialized women and trans folks, but we rarely see ourselves as a group that seeks out others with more privilege to be allies to us. It is more often the inverse; we strive to be allies to and supportive of other struggles—whether it's refugee or non-status people facing deportation or grassroots Indigenous land defenders. Those are the relationship we strive to strengthen, and not ones that reinforce our supposed “victim” or oppressed status. That comes from an understanding that movements are about responsibilities, and allyship is about ethical and consensual relationships.

AD: I want to go back to what you were saying about the state. Another thing you do in the book that is really helpful is in tracing the language of “No One is Illegal,” and making the point that *states are in fact illegal*. Part of what *centers* settler colonialism is, in fact, a whole series of gross violations of law. So can you say more about the language of illegality and how it shapes your work?

HW: I think no one is illegal, or no human being is illegal, is a profound idea; the idea that we cannot criminalize a person simply for existing. We live in a world where we call people “illegal” and this happens because we have normalized the idea that the act of crossing a border is a so-called criminal act. The criminalization of migration represents a profound injustice where the state, like corporations, attains the status of personhood that is supposedly being violated or trespassed, thus rendering human beings as non-status. To be a non-status or undocumented person is to be a non-person of sorts, especially in the state-sanctioned legal sense

of citizenship. This is then further racialized as migrants of color are cast as “terrorists” and “threats” etc. So no human being is illegal is the affirmation that, as Eduardo Galeano has said, “the world was born yearning to be a home for everyone.”

In the context of settler colonial states like Canada, a necessary corollary to No One Is Illegal has been the assertion of Canada Is Illegal. Settler-colonial states are founded on the racist doctrine of discovery and *terra nullius*, which denies and erases the presences of Indigenous peoples and nations. Conquest in Canada was designed to ensure forced displacement of Indigenous peoples from their territories, the destruction of autonomy and self-determination in Indigenous self-governance, and the assimilation of Indigenous peoples’ cultures and traditions. For the No One Is Illegal movement to assert this truth about Canada also means that we must be in alliance with Indigenous self-determination and to remember our responsibilities to support Indigenous nationhood.

It is also important to share where this framework of “No One Is Illegal, Canada Is Illegal” stems from, as it is a reflection of how this journey is embodied and enacted. Ten years ago we were supporting logistics like childcare and food preparation for an international indigenous youth gathering, and through this process were entering into dialogue about our histories and struggles. There was a march on the last day of the gathering and we heard the MC start chanting, “No one is illegal. Canada is illegal.” This was an incredible moment—articulating a vision that the settler-colonial state and its laws are illegal and illegitimate, not displaced and migrating human beings. Also this chant was a genuine expression and gesture of relationship and solidarity.

AD: The terms “decolonization” and “abolition” are being used more and more in analysis and radical action, and it feels like we’re at a moment where that language is ascendant, but also in danger of losing its specific meaning. How would you articulate the meaning of a concept or a practice of abolition, decolonization or insurgence?

HW: To me, abolition and decolonization are strong and necessary

frameworks, though we have to be cognizant of the critiques about their co-option in ways that no longer root them in the specificity of Black and Indigenous struggles. Decolonization has become a metaphor for everything—like decolonize the academy or decolonize your mind—without necessarily centering anticolonial struggle, Indigenous nationhood, and the repatriation of land. Here I would point to the crucial work of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” and Robyn Maynard’s piece “#Blacksexworkerslivesmatter: White-Washed ‘Anti-Slavery’ and the Appropriation of Black Suffering.”⁵ So the politics of decolonization and abolition must be foundational to all our movements in a way that centers, rather than erases, the historic and ongoing legacies of struggle emerging from these communities.

I tend to use the framework of a transformative politics, one that weaves in a range of critiques and articulations and that understands that the violence of the system is not an aberration. Prisons, reservations, borders, sweatshops, pipelines, gentrification, and drone warfare are all interrelated systems of exploitation and control. Movements today are re-articulating how capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, imperialism, and oppression are systems that must end. This is an overall vision oriented towards revolutionary transformation.

Transformative politics allow us to not only move beyond our silos but also help us understand how these interrelated systems of violence are at times weaponized against each other. For example, one of the main justifications for the occupation of Afghanistan was this allegedly feminist logic of liberating Afghan women. Similarly, one of the many logics of the prison industrial complex is to protect women from sexual violence. Transformative politics provides a critical lens through which to interrogate how prisons and military occupations actually reproduce rather than resolve gender violence. Battered women and gender non-conforming people are a growing part of the prison industrial complex, and women are constantly reporting rape in military bases around the

5. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012). Robyn Maynard, “#Blacksexworkerslivesmatter: White-Washed ‘Anti-Slavery’ and the Appropriation of Black Suffering,” *The Feminist Wire*, Sept. 9, 2015, available at thefeministwire.com.

world. Furthermore, military occupations and increased policing over incarcerate Indigenous, Black, migrant, trans and homeless communities. Therefore transformative politics makes visible how struggles can be appropriated in the service of empire—which is what pink-washing is all about.

Finally, I think transformative politics also provide a window into our own movements and communities. Anti-authoritarians have been great at theorizing “dismantling the system,” but there is less emphasis on the importance of building alternative institutions. It is no coincidence that the work of growing alternative relations and networks has largely been invisible in our movements because it is gendered labor. Both the dominant political economy and the microcosm of our movements are subsidized by the labor of those who provide childcare, cook meals, do secretarial work and provide emotional support. Even recognizing these as forms of labor is an uphill battle; we are able to articulate critiques of capital and labor in the wage economy but continue to invisibilize care work in the unwaged economy. A transformative politics requires us to rethink, reimagine and reorient work and its relationship to gender and dis/ability—what is the work that makes all other work possible? How do we foster social relations across generations and communities based on interdependence, resilience, vulnerability, and solidarity? Connection is, after all, the antithesis of commodification and at the heart of a truly transformative politics.

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