



BOOK REVIEW

Borders in Globalization Review
Volume 6, Issue 2 (Spring & Summer 2025): 162–163
https://doi.org/10.18357/big_r62202522372

Book Review: Unbuild Walls: Why Immigrant Justice Needs Abolition

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Unbuild Walls: Why Immigrant Justice Needs Abolition

By Silky Shah

Haymarket Books, 2024

Hardback, 256 pages

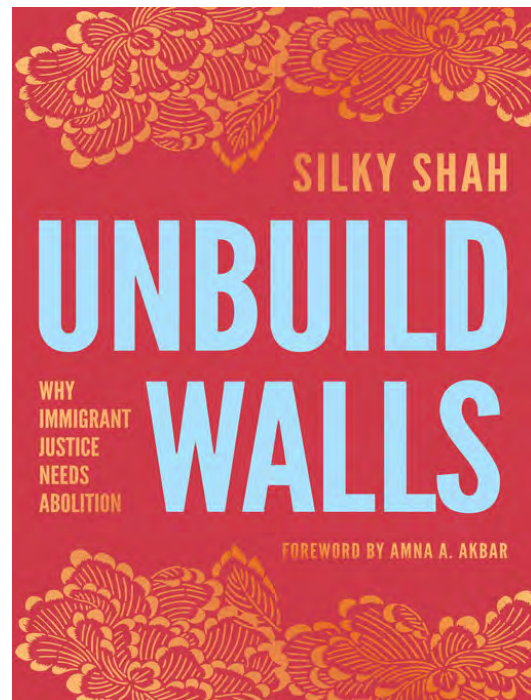
ISBN: 9798888901229

<https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/2279-unbuild-walls>

Unbuild Walls: Why Immigration Justice Needs Abolition presents a vital account of abolitionist struggles in the United States, drawing on decades of organizing experience with Detention Watch Network (DNW). Silky Shah's book maps the laws and policies that have facilitated the detention and deportation of people on the move while also reflecting on the strategies activists have used to resist and build "communities, not cages", as per one of DNW's campaign titles (2021).

As Trump returned to power and ICE made their raids into a spectacle for viewing in 4K resolution, abolitionists, community organizers, activists, and critical border scholars continue to push back against liberal discourses that problematize only the "excessive" deployment of border enforcement (Mayblin et al. 2024; Neusner & Kizuka 2021; De Noronha & Bradley 2022). After four more years of bipartisan consensus in support of policing, surveillance, incarceration, deportation, and genocide, many feel like the space for radical/abolitionist imagination opened by the Black Lives Matter movement has shrunk abruptly. Yet, as this book shows, this space not only still exists but has the potential to continue to grow.

By chronicling her journey as an organizer, the evolutions of DNW, and the campaigns the organization has been a part of, Shah shows the transformative potential of abolition and the need to connect the linked



struggles against police, prisons, borders, militarism, and racial capitalism. "Unbuild walls" is not just a call to tear down cages and border walls; it's also a reflection on the unintentional divisions that separate these movements. The book's central argument is that abolition provides the tools to analyze and organize in ways that reinforce rather than undermine each other. This argument unfolds throughout eight chapters in which Shah draws on her extensive knowledge of policy agendas and activist campaigns over the past 60 years.

The first part of the book dives into the co-constitutive development of mass incarceration and immigration enforcement in the United States. Chapter 1 traces the

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backlash to the post-civil rights era and the normalization of mass incarceration effected by the neoliberal turn. It shows how this backlash laid the groundwork for the Bush administration's raids and the creation of the DHS and ICE. In Chapter 2, Shah critically examines the Obama era as an illustration of how reformist solutions help expand and consolidate the carceral and deportation state. Chapter 3 continues this discussion by reflecting on the Trump administration's infamous practices of family separation and expulsion without the processing of asylum claims. Far from an aberration, the author argues that these practices were made possible by previous policies, and that despite mass mobilization, the Biden administration kept them in place.

In the second part of the book, Shah focuses on the history of organizing and discusses the limits and prospects of the different strategies employed. Chapter 4 credits a new generation of activists for helping the immigrant-rights movement move away from accepting “trade-offs”—policy deals to regularize some in exchange for the deportation of others—and embracing abolition instead. Chapter 5 critiques the overemphasis on private prisons in immigration activism and argues for a broader analysis of the carceral system. While recognizing the strategic benefits of this angle, which enables local organizing and offers a serious opportunity for disrupting the economy of detention, Shah criticizes how it obscures the state's role in building and running prisons. In Chapter 6, she tells the story of the local organizing victories that led to the closure of 20 detention centers in California and the Midwest. These wins were achieved through diverse forms of action, protests, litigation, and coalition work. Each success, Shah notes, generates momentum for the next, illustrating the cumulative power of building grassroots resistance.

The final section of *Unbuild Walls* offers some reflections on the road ahead for convinced abolitionists. Chapter 7 explores the relationship between legal strategies and abolitionist goals. While Shah is clear that transformative change cannot be won through the courts alone, she emphasizes the value of legal tools when deployed in tandem with organizing, exemplified by successful campaigns to end ICE-police collaborations, terminate detention contracts, and defund ICE. In Chapter 8, Shah concludes on the need to propose an agenda that goes beyond abolishing ICE. Inspired by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Shah reminds us that abolition is not simply about tearing systems down but about building life-affirming alternatives in their place. The preceding decades of organizing have shown that community-based support, mutual aid, and continuous efforts to learn and adapt “have already begun making abolition every day” (2024, 213).

The book offers rich and nuanced descriptions of the tensions that arise when abolition analysis is not centred and Shah certainly deserves recognition for posing questions that may not have clear answers yet must still be discussed. At the same time, engaging more directly with land-based and internationalist movements—such as Indigenous struggles, including Palestinian liberation—might have helped situate this conversation on abolition within a global and imperial context (Fúnez-Flores 2024; Corn tassel 2024; Natanel & Pappé 2024; El-Shewy et al. 2024)

All in all, this book reminds us that abolition is happening now, wherever people organize, resist, and imagine relations centred on care and solidarity. It has already generated interest and conversations among activists and organizers in the U.S., but scholars will also learn a great deal from this work, which provides tools to identify and organize abolitionist strategies beyond policy solutions.

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