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We welcome submissions and inquiries from prospective authors. Please visit our website mmduvic.ca, or contact the editor for more information.

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HARSHA WALIA

IN CONVERSATION WITH

MM&D EDITOR JO-ANNE LEE

MM&D editor Jo-Ann Lee talks to activist and author Harsha Walia (@HarshaWalia), about her recent book, *Undoing Border Imperialism*. Their conversation is transcribed below. You can also watch the interview in a series of three videos available on Vimeo: vimeo.com/album/3419590.

DEFINING BORDER IMPERIALISM

In this video Harsha describes the ways borders form a part of a broad system of power and empire that contribute to marginalization and racialization of vulnerable populations. She argues that it is not simply a matter of fixing a broken immigration system, but instead dismantling another tool of neoliberal oppression.

Jo-Anne: Let's talk a little bit about this concept of border imperialism, it's the topic of your new book, can you explain to the journal's readers what border imperialism is?

Harsha: The idea of borders is incomplete without a deeper analysis about how they actually function. Most conceptualizations of borders are just seen as markers of territory if you will, but in the ways that borders are experienced by people, they're a form of governmentality, they're a form of violence, and they operate not only on the site on which they exist but they operate internally as well as much more broadly. I was trying to find a way to talk about borders that really grasps their fluidity in some ways and at the same time their rigidity. And so for me the concept of border imperialism really is trying to encapsulate the ways in which borders function, the ways in which they govern our lives and particularly in which they are really a part of a broader system of power and empire.

There are four key concepts around imagining how borders work and conceptualizing how borders work. The first is that we can't talk about immigration as this kind of domestic issue, because that's how we've tended to look at immigration, as this domesticated framework of how immigrants come to the shores, come to the borders, how refugees come, and then how the state manages these migrant populations, but for me it's important to look at the starting point which is 'What creates a migrant?' 'What creates the displacement, what are the cycles of displacement and dispossession that create migrant populations?' Firstly, looking at those systemic forces like war and empire and oppression and gender-persecution, etc., that are operating at a global level, that are asymmetrical, that are disproportionately impacting poor, brown and black bodies and particularly women. What are those forces of economic imperialism, free-trade agreements, militarization particularly in the Middle-East right now. You know the

Middle-East is home to the largest stateless population, whether it's Palestine, Iraq or Afghanistan, what are these forces and how's the 'West', if you will, the global-North, complicit in these displacements and dispossessions. That's critical because one of the ways in which the state talks about migration is not only to domesticate it but to present itself as the benevolent manager of migration. We're supposed to be grateful that the Canadian Government and the US Government, etc., is allowing and welcoming immigrants. And this is something that immigrants internalize, which is why for me, challenging borders is so important because it's also part of us, I'm a migrant myself, how do we shed that internalized racism, that sense of gratitude that we're supposed to have to the state and when we shift the lens back on the state as responsible and culpable for displacement and dispossession, and for managing migration and managing dispossession, then I think that it's part of our process to 'uninternalize' and shed those myths that we're told. That's a key part of conceptualizing border imperialism, to shift the focus from migrants and the process that migrants take and oftentimes the perilous journeys that migrants take and oftentimes the so-called 'illegal' irregular journeys that migrants take, and to place the responsibility onto the state for creating and managing and in many cases causing death and killings and violence on migrant bodies.

For me there are a few other pieces around border imperialism. One is the connection to racism and the ways in which immigration increasingly is not seen as racially coded, it's seen as more of a legal debate, whether you're legal or illegal, whether you're here, if you're following the proper channels. And this is particularly the debate in Europe as well and Australia and Canada and the United States right now, the difference - the discourse that differentiates between the so-called 'legal migrant' and the 'bogus migrant'. This is really coded, even though it's not explicitly so around race, because even though we don't explicitly talk about anti-Chinese, anti-Japanese, anti-South Asian migration in Canada when we're talking about migration we are talking about race, and one of the ways in which we see this is the fact that communities of colour are constantly seen as migrants despite their legal status. In the case of many communities of colour, even though those communities have resided on these lands for centuries, they're constantly depicted as 'the dual citizen', if you will; the Chinese-Canadian, the Indian-Canadian, the Muslim-Canadian, and that dual-status casts us as constant outsiders. Whereas white people are seen as belonging to Canada, no one really traces back where white people are from or which colonized ancestors white people come from. And that of course also displaces and continues to perpetrate settler-colonialism because whiteness is not indigenous to these lands. And so that's just one of the many ways in which racism continues to operate and to use immigration as a stand-in essentially to talk about people of colour, and the struggles that regardless of legal status that communities of colour continue to face, the precarity, impoverishment, the racism, the discrimination, etc. And those come out in different moments, right now in the context of the War on Terror it's impacting especially Muslim women in specific ways. The debate of the Niqāb, which are again couched as debates on secularism and religion, are essentially racial debates and are racial forms of violence inflicted on Muslim women's bodies.

And that's another piece around border imperialism, a connected third piece, the detention of migrants. We're seeing an explosion of migrant-detention particularly across Western countries, and the links to border-militarization. So the fact that migrants are increasingly being incarcerated, essentially for the crime of trespassing a border, it's really important to unravel how migrant detention works because it is so normalized, people have taken for granted that migrants should be incarcerated because they are committing so-called illegal acts; migrants are passed as criminals. Media and politicians continue to regurgitate that notion of migrants as committing illegal acts. In Canada we have over 11,000 migrants who are detained every single year, it includes children. Canada is increasingly adopting the Australian model of mandatory detention, which means that, again, people are essentially being thrown into jail for the crime of migrating. And to me that's at the core of challenging borders, because if we look at what is the crime that has been committed, it's literally the crime of trespassing a border, which is a completely artificial construct. The state has imagined itself as an entity that can be harmed. That's what borders have created. It's given the state this personhood that is completely fake. Look at the ways in which migrant detention is part of the expansion of the prison industrial complex. How it is part and parcel of this ongoing war on brown and black bodies that operates through different logics. The war on black bodies and in particular indigenous bodies, the over-incarceration of black communities, of indigenous communities is happening simultaneously to the expansion of migrant detention. In Canada right now the incarceration of indigenous women and the incarceration of migrant-detainees are the fastest growing prison populations. And of course racism underpins how that incarceration is justified. And also, particularly in the United States but increasingly in Canada, appropriations are making a killing from migrant detention and that's really important to name.

I just came from the United States and learned there were literally quotas in migrant holding-cells. Corporations like GEO are running migrant detention-centres and have quotas for how many migrant-detainees need to be in these detention-centres and when they're under quota they literally call up ICE, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and say, 'We're under-quota,' and ICE goes out and conducts a raid.

Jo-Anne: It's like the policing technologies.

Harsha: Yes. A very clear link between militarization and the profits that come from it. After 9/11 there was a number of CEO's, of the prison industrial complex, that operate prison-companies, who came out in the business pages of financial papers across the United States, saying '9/11 will be good business for us.' So this self-perpetuating logic of needing to incarcerate people, that's another key component of border imperialism.

The final one is, and I think the critical one that's not often talked about when we talk about borders or at least is not linked in this way, is how capitalism is racialized and the key role that capitalism and labour plays in the context of managing

migration. So while it's true that racism plays a huge role in underpinning the debate about migration, it's not the case that the state wants to get rid of all people of colour, because the state also needs cheap labour, and communities of colour have typically performed that role. At a global level as well, of course, the West relies on sweat-shop labour, on cheap labour, etc., but it also needs that source of labour in-house, it needs to in-source what it typically out-sources, for domestic work all the domesticated forms of labour the state needs internal to its borders. And so migrants have always been commodified as a source of cheap labour. And increasingly under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, which Canada is drastically expanding, Canada now accepts more people under Temporary Foreign Worker programs than under Permanent Residence, which really is a challenge to this myth of Canada being so welcoming to immigrants and accepting Permanent Residents; it's not true. Increasingly people are coming as indentured-labourers under a program that's 'Migrant Workers' in words, a form of modern-day slavery, where people live in egregious conditions, have no access to basic labour standards, live in worker compounds, have their travel documents confiscated and again are indentured labour. And this pool of labour is so vulnerable, again because people are cast as 'foreigners' and 'temporary' and so readily deportable, you know, at the whim of the employer, the employer can get rid of them. This program fills a really critical need within the Canadian State and Canadian Capital, which is to ensure a constant, cheap supply of labour while maintaining this racial hierarchy of whiteness. And so it resolves this core contradiction if you will of how to keep Canada white, how to keep Canada hegemonically white and to maintain white supremacy, but needing brown and black folks to be within the nation-state. So how to be in the nation-state but not of the nation-state and so the Temporary Foreign Worker program really is that model.

And it's important to note that the Temporary Foreign Worker program in Canada, is actually being replicated all across the world. The United States has looked at it as the model to follow. When people say that Canada has a broken immigration system, and I'm focusing here on Canada but there's obviously many other examples we can draw on, but in the context of Canada, when people, including liberal, migrant justice, activists say, 'We need to fix this broken immigration system,' for me the response is actually, 'No.' because when we look at it through a lens of border imperialism, it's the perfect system, it's actually serving the purpose it's meant to, which is to serve neoliberalism and maintain racialized citizenship.

And I think that's the key part. We're not fixing a broken system, the system is functioning as it's intended to, which is why challenging border imperialism and understanding it as a framework means that we come to a different place which is not fixing or reforming the immigration system, it's completely dismantling it. Because one of the main things it does in addition to treating us as cheap labour and racializing us, it also pits us against each other. Migrants are divided between the good, desirable migrant, the model-minority, the one that will assimilate, integrate, etc., against those who aren't. And so for me the key to undoing border imperialism is understanding the way it works and to also have movements, not

start to act as border agents ourselves. How do we not perpetuate those divides within our communities and act as border agents about who has the right to migrate, and has the right to dignity. And so for me the challenge is also internal for our movements, to not reproduce systems of power where we decide who's worthy and who's not, and to undo border imperialism within our movements and our communities as well.

INDIGENOUS SOLIDARITY

Here Harsha outlines the importance of respect for indigenous knowledge and histories within the migrant justice movement. She explains how both indigenous and migrant communities are forced into narratives of settler colonialism, and challenges us to imagine an alternative in life under indigenous legal jurisdiction.

Jo-Anne: The second question was that you make an argument that the migrant justice movement, as a political movement, has to stand in solidarity with indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Could you expand on that because I think that's a very, very important point?

Harsha: I think for all movements, but particularly the migrant justice movement, it is so imperative to understand our responsibilities to indigenous nations, to the lands on which we've come to reside, to not perpetuate settler-colonialism. And one of the ways in which settler-colonialism operates of course is to tell immigrants this story, this false story that we're being accepted into and need to be grateful to the Canadian state and to whiteness, when again, in fact, whiteness is not indigenous to these lands. And so I think it is so important for us to know and to act in solidarity with the true stewards of these lands. And that's an important gesture not just symbolically but because, it is also imperative to decolonize our own understanding of how we're migrating and where we're migrating to.

There's lots of communities that can draw links, particularly Palestinian refugees who are fleeing settler-colonialism and fleeing Israeli apartheid, are coming to a very similar reality when they're arriving on Turtle Island, which is this settler-colonial reality which is intent on annihilating and committing genocide against indigenous people. Many communities can draw parallels about forces of dispossession and displacement, but at the same time I think it's important to not conflate our struggles as the same, in the sense that settler-colonialism is very different than informal, indirect colonialism that's impacted most of the global south, particularly those that are former colonies. And also to realize that once we come to Canada, immigrants, because of the model-minority myth, because of a very selective immigration process, a lot of immigrants are actively pitted against indigenous people. Anti-Native racism is immense within our communities, and we perpetuate it in many ways; this idea that we're immigrants, we toughed it out, we made it, how come indigenous people who've lived here for so long can't make it within the system. And so I think it is so important for us to understand all of the struggles that indigenous communities face, impoverishment, over-incarceration, all of those struggles flow directly from a legacy of settler-colonialism. And again

to not perpetuate this myth of the so-called welfare bum lazy Indian etc., that we're indoctrinated into and to be really open in rejecting those stereotypes and not allowing ourselves to be used as a fulcrum against which indigenous people are analyzed, essentially.

And so for me I think it's imperative, again it's not just an optional alliance. When we're talking about movement building, I think the migrant justice movement can decide to align with the labour movement or not, I think the migrant justice movement can decide to align with anti-poverty struggles or not. I think they should, but I do think that in the context of indigenous struggles I don't think it's an optional alliance, I think that it's a responsibility. I think it's our responsibility to always centre indigenous struggles within our movements because these are the lands on which we reside. And to prefigure relationships, so when we want to dismantle borders, and we want to dismantle colonial borders and capitalist white-supremacist borders then when we come here what are our responsibilities to these lands? That's an important part of the migrant justice movement because for me the migrant justice movement is the freedom to move, the freedom to be mobile but it also doesn't mean that we can come onto these lands and do as we wish. It means that we have to honour and respect the lands and communities that we're on, to understand the host laws. One of the ways, the very concrete ways, I think, in which the migrant justice movement can decolonize within our communities is in rejecting Canadian law and Canadian legal jurisdiction, and to educate ourselves on what are the host laws of these lands. What would it mean to live under and live alongside living, natural, indigenous laws? What are our responsibilities under indigenous laws? When we want to reject, when I want to reject Canadian laws and the Canadian notion of what a good citizen is, to me the corollary is, 'What is it to be a good human on this land according to indigenous laws?' That is so critical.

Jo-Anne: Can I just clarify something for you for a bit? This principle of migrant justice standing in solidarity with indigenous peoples' self-determination and reclaiming the land, it's, I guess in it's largest conceptualization it's an ethic. It's an ethical position that you're articulating here. Then moving along from that ethical position, you're outlining a political agenda too. Can you speak more to that political agenda? I understand completely the ethical place, but the political agenda, you've said a few things around the specific kinds of issues that we need to be working on. Not allowing, for example, minority communities to be used as a leverage to position indigenous people as the bad racialized-other, whereas immigrants are the good racialized-other. Various kinds of things like that, you've got a discursive platform, you've got a material platform. Can you talk a little bit about that? I'm using those words, they're not your words but I just want to tease that out a little more clearly for the readers.

Harsha: The latter? The material?

Jo-Anne: The material, yes, because I get the ethics, I've definitely got the discursive.

Harsha: Yes, I mean I think so much of it is in terms of the material, tangible ways in which we actually organize in solidarity with indigenous communities, I think a big part of it is the unlearning, I think that is immense, particularly because we are so indoctrinated into learning a particular history. Most newcomers learn about Canada from the citizenship test. You know, as flawed as the education system is, most migrants don't even have access to that, particularly if they're coming at an older age, all we have access to is the deeply state-centred, white-supremist, complete erasure of indigenous histories. And so I think as a first step it is so necessary for people doing migrant justice work to work within our communities to really build a strong understanding of settler-colonial history. And that is always a first step to understanding what the legacy has been, to understand how that legacy plays out today because it is ongoing.

And then using that history to really reject the leverage of us as the good, model-minority versus bad indigenous people, because that history, it provides the context within which to reject those stereotypes. And to work within our communities through the various means that we have access to, so for me that means accessing and doing work through Punjabi media, radio stations and South-Asian print magazines for example. And really doing that work in our communities on our own terms. You know we obviously can't do that work through the mainstream media, we have to do it through our community networks, and to prioritize that. And that can be hard, especially in the migrant justice movement, our communities are in survival mode. You're literally fighting deportation and detention on a daily basis, so it seems like an impossible task to take on education work when people are trying to survive. Or to appear patronizing, if you will, to migrants, to be like 'How do you not know this?' The material is about the practice of being in relationship, being in community and seeing this as a long term commitment to prioritizing that work as we're working alongside migrant communities to fight against the ways in which the state oppresses us.

I think that these systems are connected. It has been so important for different migrant justice organizers across this land to take on very seriously understanding and learning about indigenous host laws. It's not a small thing, I think it's immense because a lot of communities are also going through this process of resurgence where people are uncovering their own understandings of what immigration law looks like, under indigenous nationhood. And so for me that's meant working with a number of different indigenous nations who have found and are articulating what they imagine an immigration policy would look like under indigenous laws.

And again this is such a long term project, but for me it is so core because in rejecting the Canadian immigration system, to actually prefigure and centre as alternative indigenous host laws is key. Because you know it is one thing to rail against the state, and we do it. We do it all the time! It is something else to say we need to be in solidarity with indigenous nations, and we all do it in various ways. And I think the step beyond that is to actually imagine ourselves as actually living under indigenous legal jurisdiction. And to understand our responsibilities under

indigenous legal jurisdiction, and to do the work to find out what that would mean first of all. And then to conduct and enact ourselves and to embody that is kind of the goal if you will. I mean it's a process but it's also the goal, which is how do we understand ourselves as living under indigenous host laws, under indigenous legal jurisdiction, with the rules and responsibilities that come with that?

One very concrete example is, the *Unist'ot'en* camp, which is a resistance camp up in *Wet'suwet'en* territory. They've built a resistance camp in the pathway of over seven pipelines, including fracking pipelines, and they live on the land, on their traditional territory. They don't live on reserve and they're completely subsistent on traditional food systems: on hunting, on gathering. And revitalizing their clan system, and they're a governance system outside the band council essentially, right, so they're going through this process of revitalizing their governance systems. And one of the things that they do for anyone who wants to come to visit the camp, to show solidarity, is that you have to go through a process of questions; that before you enter the territory, the community can give free, prior and informed consent for you to enter into the territory. They ask a series of questions about whether you work for government or industry, what your intention is, how you will support the community. I've been through this checkpoint several times. For me when I say that I challenge borders, to me that is not a border, but it is a form of assertion of indigenous autonomy that I completely respect. And I think that this is a key part of migrant justice movements is that we're rejecting artificial, arbitrary, violent borders but that we also understand and respect that we are entering into communities and into territories that have live ways of being and resurgent ways of being.

And so to me one really material way in which migrant justice movements can take on and embody what it means to understand ourselves as living on indigenous lands and under indigenous jurisdiction, is to go through these processes with indigenous communities.

Jo-Anne: Right.

DEFINING DECOLONIZATION

In this video Harsha reflects on the concept of decolonization. Instead of prefiguring a radically new world as the goal of activism, she argues that we should look towards existing alternatives that are alive and well in indigenous communities

Jo-Anne: Now I want to segue into this question of the debate over decolonization, and I really appreciate the nuances you bring to a lot of these debates, I mean you refuse the binary positions, either/or, and in this case the question I would pose to you is about decolonization. And as you know there's a thing about how it's been taken up; on the one hand it seems to be conceptually slanted so that we want to decolonize everything, and then there's a reaction to that where we want to restrict it to retain its political power in indigenous voices about decolonization, about decolonizing the land, reclaiming the territory. And as I read you, you're

somewhere in between, I might be misreading you, but could you really articulate it for me, what your position is and why?

Harsha: Well, that's a hard question, I mean in terms of the context of the book, the book was written prior to that debate emerging although of course it's been there for a long time but emerging in the context of that article anyway. And so I did think about it after, and was thinking, 'Oh well this book is going to be unclear on this debate.' I actually think your reading is correct, if I were to give it thought. I think I do fall in the middle, for me definitely the primary struggle that one identifies decolonization with is undoubtedly indigenous struggles, and particularly indigenous struggles in a global context; you know, against white settler colonialism in Canada and understanding decolonization, yeah, it's not just a metaphor to radicalize everything. It is a metaphor of reclamation of land, of culture, of nationhood, which has been resurgent on these lands for so long and that is alive. Again, that there are alive laws on these lands, there are still laws and ceremonial protocols that govern how people are and how people need to be on these lands. So for me that is definitely the core of decolonization.

Again at a global level, which is how do we respect people's autonomy and how are borders actually violated across the global south; like military occupation and economic trade-agreements are constantly violating people's borders and autonomy. But I do also see the need to decolonize within our movements. You know, and maybe I wouldn't use that term actually in the same ways, maybe I would find another word, but I don't know that another word exists.

Jo-Anne: Deconstruction or critical analysis?

Harsha: Critical, yeah, it may not sound as good.

Jo-Anne: Putting 'critical' in front of anything seems to signal something, but you have taken up the term 'decolonizing' a lot in your book, and you talk a lot of decolonizing that has to happen within the movements and against governments and the way things are, and it's clear that decolonization for you is a very important practice: an intellectual practice, a material practice, an ethical practice. So I just really see that you still see it as useful but you at the same time acknowledge where you are coming from.

Harsha: I do see that it's useful, particularly as a paradigm. And for me actually they flow from each other, like I do hear the critique that everything is decolonized, but I also think that if we are serious, not in, you know, appropriating or co-opting way, but if we are serious about decolonizing and in understanding indigenous laws, then a lot of other forms of decolonization flow from that. For example the different territories that I've lived on, one of the teachings that I have heard and learnt about is the idea of decolonization is also fundamentally about people being human and understanding sacred circles for example and all the different gender roles that people bring into the circle and into ceremony. For me, when I talk about decolonizing our movements, decolonizing ideas of who's worthy and

who's not, decolonizing ideas of gender binary, those also stem from indigenous understandings of deconstructing all those binaries as well. So I hear the critique and I also think when we play it out and we enact and embody decolonization under an indigenous paradigm then we also arrive often at the same place. And so for me I hear the critique as people who take up decolonization as kind of a sexy word, to deconstruct things but without taking seriously indigenous sovereignty as central to decolonization, but I do think that they are all connected when we actually look at it in a holistic way. Which is why for me the primary way in the book that I suggest first is decolonization in relation to indigenous troubles. All the other forms of decolonization flow from that; which is our ethical practice, and decolonizing the ways in which we enact and embody, ways of being.

One of the main reasons that I use decolonization as an overarching framework is because for me it also stands in counter a little bit to the idea of prefiguration. In a lot of activist communities that I'm part of, prefiguration is the idea that we're going to build a new society.

Jo-Anne: It's a utopian concept?

Harsha: A bit of a utopian concept in that we're building the new in the shell of the old. Decolonization is also a counter to that, which is the idea that actually we have inherited and are living alongside, again locally and globally, alongside very ancient systems of being that are the kind of prefiguration that people are looking for. Bringing back decolonization as central is also, in my mind, because the book was written in the context of an anarchist series, to the challenge the really white, Eurocentric idea of prefiguration as needing to look toward something new rather than actually looking towards systems that exist.

Jo-Anne: I'm really glad you said that because there are a couple of books out now that are in the anarchist vein, that have elevated this concept of prefiguration, but you're actually writing against that kind of Eurocentric notion of a utopian concept of the new arising out of the ashes of the old. You're trying to say prefiguration from a decolonizing perspective is at the one time a tearing down of what exists and modeling something quite new that doesn't relate to the old. Is that right?

Harsha: Yes, and modeling something, but that is based on something much older .

Jo-Anne: Much older than the modern systems that we've inherited: the modern state system, the legal governance system that we've inherited. And it's prefiguring by drawing back on something that is pre-modern, or using an alternative modernity, because we don't want to be constantly positioning indigenous knowledge as somehow old, or ancient. But they're an alternative modern system that we want to draw on?

Harsha: Absolutely and you know again they are actually alive and well and so it's not that we need to completely prefigure and reinvent; that if we look, these systems are alive. Again, there are alive indigenous laws on these lands and

there are communities all around the world who have governance systems, who have protocols around how people, what people's relationships to each other is and aren't, what people's roles and responsibilities to each other and the land, to elders, to young people, to each other. And not to romanticize it but to say that these systems are actually alive and well and they date back and continue today. I don't know if I'm speaking against prefiguration, but definitely trying to add to how prefiguration is understood in the anarchist body of thought. How to dismantle systems, but this idea that when we are quote-unquote 'reinventing' ways of being that we are not starting from scratch; that this is not a Eurocentric white anarchist project where people have suddenly realized how to be in terms of ethical orientations.

Jo-Anne: And we're already aware of the dangers of contamination; the DNA of an old system is already there in the new one that you're trying to build.

Harsha: That's the context for it.

Jo-Anne: That's really, really important; that clarified that point – really, really important, thank you for that.