

We Need A World Without Borders On Our Increasingly Warming Planet



Harsha Walia – Photo: twitter.com

As we witness an increase in global migration amid a growing anti-immigrant sentiment, it is vital to remember that migration is mainly an outcome of political and economic processes associated with imperial conquest and capitalist globalization. Yet both liberal and conservative media exhibit similar bias toward migrations by treating them as problems that stem “from over there,” Harsha Walia points out in an exclusive interview for *Truthout*. Instead of accepting these false terms, Walia argues, we must recognize “there is no crisis at the border and there is no crisis of migration,” but instead a crisis of global apartheid.

Walia makes a case for a world without borders.

Harsha Walia, born in Bahrain and living in Vancouver, British Columbia, is a leading Canadian organizer and writer. In 2001, she co-founded the Vancouver chapter of No One Is Illegal, an anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-capitalist migrant justice movement, and has been active in various migrant justice, Indigenous solidarity, feminist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist movements over the past two decades. She is the author of several books, including *Undoing Border*

Imperialism and Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism and the Rise of Racist Nationalism.

C.J. Polychroniou: Europe and the United States are major destinations for people trying to escape war, political turmoil and poverty. In both places, the influx of “uninvited” people from foreign lands and cultures has generated an anti-immigration backlash and has led to increasingly harsh and even malicious policies in an attempt to deal with what is often referred to in the media and by experts alike as a “global migration and refugee crisis.” You have written extensively on the global migration crisis, so let me start by asking you to share with readers the way you understand and explain the factors behind this mass migration of people in the first part of the 21st century.

*Harsha Walia: Conservatives and liberals alike conceive of immigration policy as an issue of domestic reform to be managed by the state. Language such as “migrant crisis,” and the often-corresponding “migrant invasion,” is a pretext to shore up further border securitization and repressive practices of detention and deportation. Such representations depict migrants and refugees as the cause of an imagined crisis at the border, when, in fact, mass migration is the outcome of the *actual crises* of capitalism, conquest and climate change.*

In the U.S. context and the panic about the southern border, a long arc of dirty colonial coups, capitalist trade agreements extracting land and labor, climate change, and enforced oppression is the primary driver of displacement from Mexico and Central America. Hondurans, El Salvadorans and Guatemalans make up the fastest-growing proportion of people crossing into the U.S. Over the past decade, migration from these countries has increased fivefold. These perilous migrations are portrayed by liberal media as “not our problem” and stemming from “over there.” However, these migrations are “our problem” because they are inextricable from displacements created by U.S. dirty wars backing death squads across Central America and the counterinsurgency terror of the neoliberal “war on drugs.” From the war against the FMLN [Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front] in El Salvador to the coup to oust Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, there is an unbroken line of U.S. interventions in Central America. Migration is a predictable consequence of these continuous displacements, yet today the U.S. is fortifying its border against the very people impacted by its own policies.

As of 2016, new displacements caused by climate disasters are outnumbering new

displacements as a result of persecution by a ratio of three to one. By 2050, an estimated 143 million people will be displaced in just three regions: Africa, South Asia and Latin America. El Salvador and Guatemala are among the 15 countries most at risk from environmental disaster, despite contributing the least to climate change. Rural and Indigenous farmers growing coffee, sugarcane, rice, beans and maize are facing crop losses, and successive droughts between 2014 and 2018 impacted over 2.5 million people in Central America.

Yet, displaced refugees — least responsible for and with the fewest resources to adapt to climate variations — face militarized borders in our warming world. A Pentagon-commissioned [report](#) from 2003 encapsulates this hostility to climate refugees: “Borders will be strengthened around the country to hold back unwanted starving immigrants from the Caribbean islands (an especially severe problem), Mexico, and South America.”

The U.S. is also funding immigration enforcement deep in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico to prevent people from even reaching the U.S.-Mexico border. Meanwhile, U.S.-based industries have polluted our world with [700 times more emissions](#) than the entire Northern Triangle of Central America, and the overall ecological debt owed to poor countries by rich ones is estimated at \$47 trillion. [Rich countries grow at the ecological expense of poor countries.](#)

The backlash against global migration has fueled the rise of far right movements throughout the Western world, though hostile views toward immigrants and refugees vary from country to country. Do you see migration as a crisis in itself, or a crisis of political opportunism? And how do you propose that governments deal with anti-immigration backlash?

While far right movements are immigration exclusionists — driven by a xenophobic and restrictionist ideology — the reality is that anti-immigration backlash is not intended to exclude *all migrants*, but, rather, to make the condition of migration, including the condition of migrant labor, more precarious. Border controls manufacture spatialized differences not to completely exclude all people but to capitalize on them. Neoliberal U.S. commentator Thomas Friedman says candidly, “We have a real immigration crisis and ... the solution is a high wall with a big gate — but a smart gate.” Immigration enforcement is not only about the racial terror of outright exclusion but also about producing pliable labor — what Friedman is calling the “smart gate.”

Capitalism requires labor to be constantly segmented and differentiated — whether across race, gender, ability, caste, citizenship, etc. — and the border acts as a spatial fix for capitalism. Borders are not intended to exclude all people or to deport all people, but to create conditions of *deportability*, which in turn increases social and labor precarity. Workers' labor power is captured by the border and this cheapened labor is exploited by the employer. The lack of full immigration status and the tying of visa status to an employer are key to creating pools of cheapened, indentured laborers. Workers are then kept compliant through threats of termination and deportation. According to one study, [52 percent](#) of companies in the U.S. threaten to call immigration authorities on workers during union drives. The production of “migrant labor,” a group of workers *in* the nation-state but differentiated *as* non-citizen labor, demonstrates the centrality of bordering regimes to both coerce labor under racial capitalism and to restrict citizenship through anti-migrant xenophobia.

Around the world, contemporary [bracero](#) programs represent an extreme neoliberalization of both immigration and labor policies. The distinct ordering of legal-but-deportable migrant labor generates structural hierarchies between racialized migrant workers and citizen workers: pitting workers against each other by scapegoating migrant workers for lowered wages, and further affixing race to citizenship. There is an entire class of workers who, even though they are living and laboring alongside us, are suddenly stratified differently in both the labor force and in the nation-state. Though they are our neighbors and in the same workforce as us, they have completely different rights and access to services. “Migrant workers” is a euphemism for “Third World” workers, and jobs like farm work, domestic work and service work that cannot be outsourced are being insourced through migrant work. Insourcing and outsourcing represent two sides of the same capitalist coin: deliberately deflated labor and political power. This means that we have to be able to take on the fight not only to end all detentions and deportations but to also fight for full and permanent immigration status, labor protections and living wages for all.

There is a mainstream consensus that countries have a right to set limits on how many people they allow to enter or move within their borders. Obviously, you disagree with this policy, so it would be most useful to share your views about borders and whether it is realistic to engage in a fight for a world without borders and for the implementation of a no-borders political regime.

There are at least 50,013 recorded deaths of migrants around the world since 2014. As of 2022, there are at least 89.3 million people worldwide who are forcibly displaced. This is escalating with climate disasters; today an estimated one person every two seconds is being displaced due to a climate catastrophe. Liberalism reframes conversations about this immense, preventable violence into seemingly technocratic questions of visa types, quotas and legality. This has also removed immigration discussions from an analysis and accounting of global asymmetries of power — of capitalism, white supremacy, class, gender, caste, ableism and imperialism — and constrained them to domestic policy discussions. Finally, liberal and neoliberal discourse dampens revolutionary possibilities with talk of “pragmatism,” “realism” and “incrementalism.”

Given the violent deathscape for literally millions of people around the world, what alternative is there other than to fight for a world without borders? We must refuse to live in a world where the majority of the world’s people are destined to live without adequate food, shelter or access to life-saving vaccines because of where they were born.

What is the function of borders today? Borders maintain asymmetric relations of wealth accrued from colonial impoverishment, of mobility for some and mass immobility and containment for most — essentially, a divided working class and system of global apartheid determining who can live where and under what conditions. Border policies cannot be tweaked or reformed, they must be dismantled if we believe in justice at a planetary scale. Real advocates of internationalism cannot accept the lingering reality of the “Global South,” which continues to exist in large part because of the continued differentiation of borders.

A world without borders is not the same as a world with open borders. In an open-borders world, the world stays configured the way it currently is with massive inequality, mass displacement and continued hierarchical differentiation, except borders are opened up. If people are still being forced from their lands, and some parts of the world are still being plundered and treated as sacrifice zones for the centers of power, there is no justice in that. A no-borders politics is more expansive than the site of the border itself. A no-borders politics is about dismantling all bordering, all ordering and all exploitative regimes.

To say that we need to live in a world that doesn’t have borders is not only to

struggle for the rights of refugees and migrants, but to fight for freedom for *all* against displacement and immobility. It is to fight for liberation so that everyone has a home and where we are all able to live freely in our neighborhoods, our lands and our homes, in relation and kinship with one another. The battle against borders is necessarily inclusive of movements against gentrification, liberation struggles against colonialism and occupation, the fight to be free from policing and cages and bosses and banks, the dream of being at home in our bodies, and to ensure we have a habitable Earth for all living creatures. We have to dismantle all the systems that uphold a system of apartheid that even allows the Global North to exist in relation to the Global South, or the conditions of the South within the North. A no-borders world includes the freedom to stay and the freedom to move, meaning that no one should be forcibly displaced from their homes and lands, and that people should have the freedom to move with safety and dignity. Those may seem contradictory, but they are actually necessary corollaries. We want an end to all detentions and deportations, full immigration status for all migrants, demilitarization, abolition of prisons and police, dismantling of capitalism and collective liberation for all. We only achieve this by believing in the necessity of a world without borders and by committing to the beautiful tradition of struggle.

Can changing the narrative change society and the world at large? If so, how do we change the narrative about migration and borders?

There is no crisis at the border and there is no crisis of migration. Rather, there is a relentless crisis of displacement and immobility within and across nation-state borders. The border, the prison, the sweatshop, the reservation, the checkpoint, the gated community are all part of the same carceral system operating through dispossession, capture, containment and immobility. These bordering/ordering regimes simultaneously manufacture and discipline surplus populations under capitalism and colonialism, while extracting land, labor and life itself.

Classifications such as “migrant” or “refugee” do not even represent unified social groups as much as they symbolize state-regulated relations of difference and state-manufactured conditions of vulnerability. While the rich from wealthy states routinely enjoy borderless mobility around the world — whether as investors, bankers, expats or hipster colonist tourists — the world’s majority of racialized, poor people are subjected to criminalization, illegalization, immobility and premature death. The politics of what we know as “immigration and borders” must therefore be placed within globalized asymmetries of power, creating mass

displacement and constricting mobility around the world. This is why the migration crisis being declared a *new* crisis with *Western* countries positioned as its primary victims is so offensive. Capitalism, colonialism, genocide, slavery and indentureship are not only conveniently erased as continuities of violence in current invocations of a border crisis, but are also the very unfreedoms that are the conditions of possibility for the border itself.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).