



DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

What are you reading?

Walia, H. (2021), *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*. Chicago: Haymarket books.

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DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 12, Issue 1

<https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.95440>

Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281

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Walia, H. (2021), *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*. Chicago: Haymarket books.

In the academic year 2021-2022, I began writing my bachelor's thesis. While the specific research topic was still taking shape, the broader themes – migration and borders – were established early on. Approaching these topics from a decolonial perspective, I started searching for relevant literature. One of the first books I came across was *Border and Rule: Global Migration, capitalism, and the Rise of racist nationalism* by Harsha Walia, published a couple of months earlier in 2021. The book immediately caught my interest, so I ordered it. At that moment, I had no idea how profoundly it would impact me, both on a personal and intellectual level.

Harsha Walia is a Canadian activist and writer based in Vancouver. She was born in Bahrain to parents of Punjabi ancestry. As she explains, her background story is heavily influenced by borders. Together with fifteen thousand others, her grandfather's family was displaced from their village after the partition of Pakistan and India. Afterward, he worked on passenger and cargo trains that transported up to 5,000 refugees daily. Walia grew up with stories of torture, kidnappings, burnings, rapes, and massacres. Yet her political awareness was only deeply shaped by her later activism. She co-founded the No One Is Illegal movement in Canada, an anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist migrant justice movement.

Walia is thus not a traditional scholar. Through her writing, she wants to contribute to 'changing the world'. This desire is echoed throughout *Border and Rule*. Central to her work is the notion that borders are not natural or neutral. Emphasizing her argument, Walia builds upon decolonial literature and on what is called critical border studies, this body of literature argues that borders are not fixed or natural; they are constructed to uphold colonial power structures. Borders are 'productive regimes concurrently generated by and producing social relations of dominance' (p.12), and this occurs in the function of racial capitalism. We find ourselves in an era of neoliberal globalization, which facilitates the movement of capital. At the same time, borders are being built to restrict the mobility of racialized people of the global South. This might sound contradictory at first sight, but as Walia explains: '[t]he free flow of capital requires precarious labor, which is shaped by borders through immobility' (Walia, 2021, p. 6).

Borders and Rule was a wake-up call for me. Like many others, I was raised by the idea that the border and nation-state are somehow natural entities, that migration is a problem unfolding across borders. However, Walia does not settle for such a simplistic analysis. Instead of understanding migration as a problem unfolding across borders, she argues that migration is a *problem of borders*. She explains this by citing Nicholas de Genova, who stated: 'If there were no borders, there would be no migration – only mobility' (de Genova in Walia, 2021, p. 6).

The politics of border abolitionism was one of the book's most interesting insights I gained. For Walia, a world without borders is not just about getting rid of the physical borders. Even if borders are gone, we would not automatically live in a more just society. A world without borders requires not just their removal, but a complete reimagining of global power structures. It is about dreaming and working towards a different world, one in which borders do not make sense anymore. Hence, border justice entails a revolutionary project that is not only about the freedom to move. It is also about the freedom not to be displaced. Both aspects are intertwined as they cannot be seen as two distinct claims.

Reading *Border and Rule* was my first meaningful engagement with the topic of migration – it was the first time the subject felt intellectually stimulating and even exciting to explore. Up until reading this book, I had been stuck within an invisible paradigm in which critiques always revolved around 'humanising' borders and focusing on 'innocent', 'real' refugees. Harsha Walia rejects this narrative, as it only reproduces the racialised hierarchies of 'deserving'. Instead, of framing migration as an 'exceptional event', Walia explains how

the forced migration of at least 103 million people (refugees and migrants) across the world does not occur in a vacuum, but is a consequence of the violent capitalist world order we are living in. A world order in which people from the Global South are disproportionately affected by climate change, war, forced debt, and resource depletion.

Border and Rule is not a book you simply read and set aside; it demands engagement. It forces the reader to rethink the world, their place in it, and the structures they may have taken for granted. Walia does not just offer critique, but calls for a fundamental shift in how we understand migration, borders, and justice. Her work challenges us to think differently, to act differently, and to confront the violent world order that shapes the movement – and forced immobility – of millions.

Albina Fetahaj

Albina Fetahaj is a student in the interuniversity and interfaculty master's program in Gender en Diversiteit, co-organized by the five Flemish universities. She holds a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's in Conflict and Development Studies. In 2024, she published her first book, *Grenskolonialisme* (EPO). Her research interests lie at the intersection of critical border studies, postcolonial studies, and Black studies.