this is the year that those
who swim the border’s undertow
and shiver in boxcars
are greeted with trumpets and drums
at the first railroad crossing
on the other side;
this is the year that the hands
pulling tomatoes from the vine
uproot the deed to the earth that sprouts the vine,
the hands canning tomatoes
are named in the will
that owns the bedlam of the cannery;
this is the year that the eyes
stinging from the poison that purifies toilets
awaken at last to the sight
of a rooster-loud hillside,
pijgrimage of immigrant birth;
this is the year that cockroaches
become extinct, that no doctor
finds a roach embedded
in the ear of an infant;
this is the year that the food stamps
of adolescent mothers
are auctioned like gold doubloons,
and no coin is given to buy machetes
for the next bouquet of severed heads
in coffee plantation country.
—Martin Espada, “Imagine the Angel of Breads”

This book is about undoing borders—undoing the physical borders that enforce a global system of apartheid, and undoing the conceptual borders that keep us separated from one another. Such visions are in the service of stubborn survival, and hold the vehement faith that there are millions subverting the system and liberating themselves from its chains. Just over the year that this book was written, hundreds of thousands have defiantly taken to the streets and won victories as part of
the Idle No More movement, Quebec student strike, Tar Sands blockade, Arab Spring uprising, European-wide anti-austerity strike, Undocumented and Unafraid campaign, and Boycott Divest Sanctions movement.

This work is a humble project; a modest effort born out of a decade of social movement organizing, for which no single individual can take credit or attempt to objectively describe. Writing this book has been a journey of overcoming my trepidation in documenting and sharing experiences related to a movement in which I have been deeply involved, yet in which I am not alone. I have had countless mentors and comrades who have challenged and influenced my thinking. I want to be explicit about these relationships given the individualistic nature of writing and the tendency toward celebrity culture in activism. There is no liberation in isolation; indeed, there is no liberation possible in isolation. This book reflects the collective and collaborative nature of social movements, and is the achievement of all those who informed its content, those who helped to edit and mold it, those whose voices and artwork are contained within these pages, and most important, those who daily self-determine and inspire rebellions and resurrections that are worth writing about.

Undoing Border Imperialism is also the piecing together of my own exiled living. My commitment to fighting state-imposed borders, which divide the rich from the poor, white bodies from brown/black bodies, the West from the Orient, is etched in blood. My mother’s family is a product of the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan—a colonially created border that displaced twelve to fifteen million people within four years. My father spent most of his adult life as a migrant worker subsisting on a daily diet of sweat, prayers, once-a-week long-distance phone calls, and the indignity of always being a “foreigner.” I have lived with precarious legal status for years and have seen the insides of an inhumane detention center.

Though this book is not an autobiography, these personal experiences, memories, and stories are inseparable from the movements I am a part of and shape much of the analysis that I present in this book.

Undoing Border Imperialism

*Borderlands, the ultimate Achilles’ heel of colonialism and imperialism.*
—Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “Invasion of the Americas and the Making of the Mestizocoyote Nation”

The experiences of my family and other displaced migrants—what to Chicana feminist Cherrie Moraga is actually indescribable: “to gain the word, to describe the loss, I risk losing everything”—take place in the context of broader systemic forces. Mainstream discourses, and even some segments of the immigrant rights movement, extol Western generosity toward displaced migrants and remain silent about the root causes of migration. But as Nobel laureate Amartya Sen explains, “Increased migratory pressure over the decades owes more to the dynamism of international capitalism than just the growing size of the population of third world countries.” Capitalism and imperialism have undermined the stability of communities, and compelled people to move in search of work and survival.

Capital, and the transnationalization of its production and consumption, is freely mobile across borders, while the people displaced as a consequence of the ravages of neoliberalism and imperialism are constructed as demographic threats and experience limited mobility. Less than 5 percent of the world’s
migrants and refugees come to North America. When they do, they face armed border guards, indefinite detention in prisons, dangerous and low-wage working conditions, minimal access to social services, discrimination and dehumanization, and the constant threat of deportation. Western states therefore are undoubtedly implicated in displacement and migration: their policies dispossess people and force them to move, and subsequently deny any semblance of livelihood and dignity to those who can get through their borders. Border imperialism, which I propose as an alternative analytic framework, disrupts the myth of Western benevolence toward migrants. In fact, it wholly flips the script on borders; as journalist Dawn Paley aptly expresses it, “Far from preventing violence, the border is in fact the reason it occurs.” Border imperialism depicts the processes by which the violences and precarities of displacement and migration are structurally created as well as maintained.

Border imperialism encapsulates four overlapping and concurrent structurings: first, the mass displacement of impoverished and colonized communities resulting from asymmetrical relations of global power, and the simultaneous securitization of the border against those migrants whom capitalism and empire have displaced; second, the criminalization of migration with severe punishment and discipline of those deemed “alien” or “illegal”; third, the entrenchment of a racialized hierarchy of citizenship by arbitrating who legitimately constitutes the nation-state; and fourth, the state-mediated exploitation of migrant labor, akin to conditions of slavery and servitude, by capitalist interests. While borders are understood as lines demarcating territory, an analysis of border imperialism interrogates the modes and networks of governance that determine how bodies will be included within the nation-state, and how territory will be controlled within and in conjunction with the dictates of global empire and transnational capitalism.

Borders are, to extrapolate from philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, concurrently transgressed (when extending the reach of empire) and fortified (when policing the territorial center). Border controls are most severely deployed by those Western regimes that create mass displacement, and are most severely deployed against those whose very recourse to migration results from the ravages of capital and military occupations. Practices of arrest without charge, expulsion, indefinite detention, torture, and killings have become the unexceptional norm in militarized border zones. The racist, classist, heteropatriarchal, and ableist construction of the legal/desirable migrant justifies the criminalization of the illegal/undesirable migrant, which then emboldens the conditions for capital to further exploit the labor of migrants. Migrants’ precarious legal status and precarious stratification in the labor force are further inscribed by racializing discourses that cast migrants of color as eternal outsiders: in the nation-state but not of the nation-state. Coming full circle, border imperialism illuminates how colonial anxieties about identity and inclusion within Western borders are linked to the racist justifications for imperialist missions beyond Western borders that generate cycles of mass displacement. We are all, therefore, simultaneously separated by and bound together by the violences of border imperialism.

Discussing border imperialism also foregrounds an analysis of colonialism. Colonially drawn borders divide Indigenous families from each other. Just as the British Raj partitioned my parent’s homeland, Indigenous communities across Turtle Island have been separated as a result of the colonially imposed Canadian and US borders. Indigenous lands are increasingly becoming the battleground for settler states’ escalating policies of border militarization. In southern Arizona, for example, the O’odham have been organizing against the construction of the US-Mexico border wall, part of which would run through the Tohono O’odham reservation and make travel to ceremonial sites
across the border more difficult. Alex Soto, a Tohono O'odham arrested for occupying US Border Patrol offices in 2010, states that the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Border Patrol, Immigration Custom Enforcement, and their corporate backers such as Wackenhut, are the true criminals. . . . Indigenous Peoples have existed here long before these imposed borders, and Elders inform us that we always honored freedom of movement. . . . The impacts of border militarization are constantly being made invisible in and by the media, and the popular culture of this country. . . . Border militarization destroys Indigenous communities. Borders also factionalize heterogeneous communities and rigidify allegiances to artificially homogenized statist nationalisms. Multiracial Indigenous feminist Jessica Danforth writes, “What the border has done to far too many of our First Nations communities is horrific and atrocious on so many levels—and it has poisoned our minds to think in singular factions, instead of a full circle. . . . We belong to Mother Earth in whom no one has claim over—and where there aren’t any borders.”

Rather than conceiving of immigration as a domestic policy issue to be managed by the state, the lens of border imperialism focuses the conversation on the systemic structuring of global displacement and migration through and in collusion with capitalism, colonial empire, state building, and hierarchies of oppression. These interrelated and overlapping forces of political, economic, and social organization shape the nature of migration, and hence inform the experiences of migrants and displaced peoples. Australian author McKenzie Wark reminds us, “Those who seek refuge, who are rarely accorded a voice, are nevertheless the bodies that confront the injustice of the world. They give up their particular claim to sovereignty and cast themselves on the waters. Only when the world is its own refuge will their limitless demand be met.” From May Day marches of millions of undocumented migrants in the United States and riots of immigrant youths in France to weekly detention center protests in Australia and daily mobilizations against the Israeli apartheid wall, localized resistances are manifestations of a global phenomenon affirming the freedom to stay, move, and return in the face of border imperialism.

Indigenous Secwepemc artist Tania Willard observes, “Fences and borders can’t stop the flow of rivers, migration of butterflies, or the movement of people, and won’t stop the spirit of freedom.” Undoing border imperialism would mean a freer society for everyone since borders are the nexus of most systems of oppression. While this book focuses on mobilizing against state borders, borders and the violences they enforce surround us. Much like immigration laws criminalizing migrants for transgressing state borders, trespass and private property laws outlaw squatting and the common use of space, while legalizing the colonial occupation and division of Indigenous lands. Interrogating such discursive and embodied borders— their social construction and structures of affect—reveals how we are not just spatially segregated but also hierarchically stratified. Whether through military checkpoints, gated communities in gentrified neighborhoods, secured corporate boardrooms, or gendered Bathrooms, bordering practices delineate zones of access, inclusion, and privilege from zones of invisibility, exclusion, and death. Everywhere that bordering and ordering practices proliferate, they reinforce the enclosure of the commons, thus reifying apartheid relations at the political, economic, social, and psychological levels. Palestinian scholar Edward Said writes, “Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imagining.”

Decolonizing Movement Borders

Maybe home is somewhere I’m going and never have been before.
—Warsan Shire, “To Be Vulnerable and Fearless: An Interview with Writer Warsan Shire”

Beyond conceptualizing border imperialism, this book is about migrant justicemovements undoingborder imperialism. As queer black educator Darnell Moorermarks, “To live, we must put an end tothose things that would, otherwise, be cause for our own funerals.” The process of grassrootscommunity organizing—resisting together and building solidarities against the various modes ofgovernance constituted through borders—leads to the generation of transnational relations, whichnovelist Kiran Desai calls “a bridge over the split.” It is throughthis kind of active engagement againstimperialism, capitalism, state building, andoppression—along with the nurturing of emancipatory andexpansive social relations and identities, forged in and through the course of struggle—that visionaryalternatives to border imperialism can be actualized.

All movements need an anchor in a shared positive vision, not a homogeneous or exact or perfectcondition, but one that will nonetheless dismantle hierarchies, disarm concentrations of power, guidejust relations, and nurture individual autonomy alongside collective responsibility. In the prophetic words of black historian Robin Kelley, “Without new visions we don’t know what to build, only whattoknock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making arevolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us.”

This necessitates creating concrete alternatives and strengthening relations outside the purview of thestate’s institutions and its matrices of power and control. Such alternatives unsettle the stateand capitalism by functioning outside their reach.

Decolonization is a framework that offers a positive and concrete prefigurative vision. Prefiguration isthe notion that our organizing reflects the society we wish to live in—that the methods we practice, institutions we create, and relationships we facilitate within our movements and communities align with our ideals. Many activists argue that prefiguration involves envisioning a completely “new” society. But as a prefiguring framework, decolonization grounds us in an understanding that we have alreadyinherited generations of evolving wisdom about living freely and communally while stewarding the Earth from anticolonial commoning practices, anticapitalist workers’ cooperatives, anti-oppressive communities of care, and in particular matriarchal Indigenous traditions. As theorists Aman Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes forcefully assert, “Decolonization demands the valuing of Indigenous sovereignty in its material, psychological, epistemological, and spiritual forms.”

Enacting a politics of decolonization also necessitates an undoing of the borders between one another. Queer feminist philosopher Judith Butler unmasks and celebrates human vulnerability andinterdependency: “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other.”

In the face of omnipresent physical and psychological colonialism, decolonization traverses the political and personal realms of our lives, and honors diverse articulations of nonhierarchical and non-oppressiveassociation. Decolonization movements create an alternative to power through committed struggle againstsettler colonialism, border imperialism, capitalism, and oppression, as well asthrough concretepractices that center other ways of laboring, thinking, loving, stewarding, and living. Ultimately,decolonization grounds us in gratitude and humility through the realization that we are but one part of the land and its creation, and encourages us to constitute our kinship and movement networks based onshared affinities as well as responsible solidarities.
Why No One Is Illegal?

"What would be the implications of acting out of love rather than the dictates of the nationalistic mind?"
—ShivamVij, “Of Nationalism and Love in Southasia”

I have been active in the migrant justice movement, specifically through No One Is Illegal (NOII) groups in Canada, for over a decade. NOII is a migrant justice movement that mobilizes tangible support for refugees, undocumented migrants, and (im)migrant workers, and prioritizes solidarity with Indigenous communities. Grounded in anticolonial, anticapitalist, ecological justice, Indigenous self-determination, anti-imperialist, and anti-oppression politics, NOII groups organize and fight back against systems of injustice through popular education and direct action. NOII groups exist across Canada, but are organized autonomously as a loose network with shared values and some ad hoc coordination. It was only in 2012 that the existing NOII groups drafted a joint statement of unity, in which we describe ourselves as “part of a worldwide movement of resistance that strives and struggles for the right to remain, the freedom to move, and the right to return.”

Mapping the currents of NOII’s mobilizing and movement-based practices is critical for five reasons. First, NOII offers a systemic critique of border imperialism. This stands in contrast to more mainstream immigrant rights movements that ignore the centrality of empire and capitalism to the violence of displacement, migration, and border controls. Second, NOII’s systemic critique, as an organizing framework, facilitates a convergence of a range of social movements. Links are forged between antidetention and antiprison activists, between antipoverty movements and nonstatus communities to ensure public access to basic services, between local anticolonial organizing and anti-imperialist international solidarity organizing, and between gender justice movements’ defense of our bodies and environmental justice movements’ defense of the land.

Third, the work of NOII is multilayered. While organizing from an antistate framework, NOII also strategically navigates the state apparatus in order to win tangible victories for those facing detention and deportation. This kind of mobilizing cannot easily be dismissed as simply being reformist since it ensures that we are engaging with people who are directly impacted by the injustices of border imperialism. Being rooted and relevant in such a way amplifies the struggle for structural change and collective freedom. The careful and thoughtful balance of strategies is explored throughout this book as it is foundational to earning trust and respect for NOII’s organizing among affected community members and radicals alike.

Fourth, the mobilizing of NOII provides lessons on maintaining principled political positions while expanding communities of resistance through effective broad-based alliances. A major corporate newspaper begrudgingly acknowledged the force of NOII: “The once fringe community group . . . has grown in popularity . . . Its crusade for undocumented migrants have made headlines and earned it recognition in the mainstream.” In a time of the expansion of the nonprofit-industrial complex, NOII is an example of all-volunteer, radical, and grassroots community organizing that is sustainable, with a growing ability to capture people’s imaginations and a capacity to win victories. After nine years of grassroots organizing, for example, NOII-Toronto has not only popularized migrant justice issues but also mobilized to make Toronto the country’s first Sanctuary City, where city services are guaranteed to all regardless of their citizenship status. In an effort to discredit the cross-country popularity and effectiveness of NOII, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Jason Kenney recently denounced NOII in
Parliamentas “not simply another noisy activist group but hard-line anti-Canadian extremists.”

Finally, returning to the words of Kelley, NOII offers a prefigurative vision for a different kind of society. The very name and its various invocations, such as “NoHuman is Illegal,” “Personnen’est illegal,” and “Nadiees illegal,” emphasize that all humans are inherently worthy and valuable, and that policies that illegalize human beings are legal and moral fictions. Undoing border imperialism requires that we undo power structures, while prefiguring the social relations we wish to have and the forms of leadership we wish to support. Within NOII, we take leadership from marginalized communities, particularly communities of color and Indigenous nations impacted by state controls and systemic oppression. Such methods of organizing within NOII aim to reflect our vision of antioppressive, egalitarian, and noncoercive societies.

For these reasons, an analysis of NOII’s decade-long history offers relevant insights for all organizers on effective strategies to overcome state-imposed borders as well as the barriers within movements in order to cultivate fierce, loving, and sustainable communities.