

Harsha Walia

“Anti-Oppression, Decolonization, and Responsible Allyship”

Transcript of interview recorded at PowerShift Canada October 28, 2012 in Ottawa on unceded Algonquin territory (11 minutes)

On [Youtube: youtube.com/watch?v=IGqhgRr66ng](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGqhgRr66ng).

Video interview by Greg Macdougall, presented by Indigenous Peoples Solidarity Movement Ottawa

HW: My name is Harsha Walia and I am an activist based in Vancouver, which is unceded Coast Salish Territories.

GM: And you just gave a workshop here at Powershift, on anti-oppression, decolonization, and allyship. Can you introduce anti-oppression for us?

HW: Yeah, so, the workshop was around, as you mentioned, anti-oppression, decolonization, and responsible allyship, and with a focus on looking at the ways in which we are all complicit within forms of oppression and really being responsible to those forms of oppression that we are complicit in. And so, systemic oppression, of course, has a tradition within social movements, and is basically the principle and the idea that, in order to meaningfully build an inclusive movement and one that is *truly* egalitarian, and *truly* anti-oppressive, we actually need to name, *explicitly* name, and be proactive about the forms of oppression that exist in our society.

You know, there are many of them, but in particular race and class, and sexuality and gender and ability, and to be able to name those systems in order to confront them; and particularly, when we talk about colonialism and decolonization, we can't talk about decolonization without, of course, talking about the systemic oppression of indigenous people across Turtle Island.

And we see that in a variety of ways, right? So within the climate movement, of course, we see that indigenous people are most impacted in terms of the impact of environmental degradation. The most impacted communities along the tar sands, for example, are indigenous communities. But its not just an issue of impact, it's also looking at what are the structures that support those forms of colonialism, right? So, to me, it's also a form of environmental racism that indigenous communities are downstream from the tar sands because, if the communities that were downstream from the tar sands were white communities or major urban centers, then the tar sands, I would argue, would not be proceeding at the rate that it was proceeding. The ability for people to make the *argument*, even, that we need the economy of the tar sands or that we need jobs from the tar sands when people are *dying* is a function of environmental racism and its a form of colonialism where the *deaths* of people matter less than money.

So, for me, it's important to name systemic oppression and to understand systemic oppression as linked to colonialism because we have to have an understanding of power and privilege in order to understand colonialism. And colonialism again impacts indigenous communities in a variety of ways. It's not just the issue of land, although that is central and *definitely* central, it's also looking at ways in which that's connected to sexual violence, for example.

Indigenous women are disproportionately impacted by sexual colonial gender violence in Canada. We know that there are over 3,000 – the official estimates are far too low – there are over 3,000 missing and murdered indigenous women across Canada. We know that indigenous people are disproportionately impacted by rates of poverty, are over-incarcerated and are over-surveilled, so the prison system is full of indigenous inmates, even though indigenous people are a much lower percentage of the population.

There has been a whole legacy of colonialism that marks this land, and as non-native people – and I am a non-native person – it's really critical for non-natives to understand ... the impact of colonialism, what the impact of colonialism has been on indigenous people, as well as the ways in which we have benefitted; and that is where systemic oppression is also a really useful framework for understand colonialism. Because systemic oppression and analysis of systemic oppression teaches us that, you know, in order for someone to be marginalized, someone else has to be benefitting. So it's not enough to talk about the ways in which indigenous people are impacted without also looking at the ways in which non-natives are benefitting. And that to me is really critical.

And so, decolonization, in terms of anti-colonial work, I'd say first and foremost comes – it comes with a deep responsibility that we have an obligation to struggle alongside indigenous communities and support indigenous self-determination. To me it's not an optional thing. It's not something that we can *choose* to engage in, it's not something that we can say, "Oh, I don't really work on that issue, I work on something else." To me, it is critical that whatever issue we are working on that indigenous solidarity is part of that work. And I really want to stress that: that decolonization and anti-colonial struggle is an absolute obligation of non-native people across Turtle Island.

... I draw particularly on the work of people like Andrea Smith who is an indigenous feminist who has talked a lot about the ways in which – particularly for people who come from other marginalized communities – [we are complicit in settler colonialism and benefit from colonialism]. ... For me as a person of color and someone who is a migrant, [and] ... of course other communities of color are impacted and face racism, but we also have to understand the ways in which we are complicit in settler colonialism and benefit from colonialism.

So for me, ... the starting point of decolonization is an obligation to anti-colonial struggle. Also, it comes with an understanding that we have to fundamentally reorient the ways in which we understand social movements, and that means re-centering an indigenous worldview, or indigenous *worldviews* I should say, because there are many. And that requires a total transformation of the ways in which we organize and a total transformation in the ways in which we think. Again it requires a deep sense of humility and responsibility to really bring ourselves out of a capitalist, colonial, and oppressive system and to center another way of being.

And so, that means challenging tokenism, right? It means that it's not enough to just say, "Hey, I'm organizing a demo, I'm going to make sure that one indigenous person is a speaker." It means, *no*, you fundamentally organize your movement and your group and our work in accordance with the principles of indigenous self-determination and indigenous leadership. To me, that leadership is a critical piece. It's not simply enough to include, we actually have to center and take leadership from indigenous communities.

GM: And you said that when you go to indigenous communities and you want to work with them, involve them in your work, you were talking about how you don't just want to come and you don't know, you want to ask what is important to them, and you kind of touched on a range of issues. So say, for example, we take the environment, and you go and you're not just going to say, "Well, I work in environment so I want to work with environmental issues and you." You were talking about finding out the priorities of the communities.

HW: Yeah, I think a basic principle of allyship and decolonization is based on the principle of humility and solidarity and [our] responsibility, is to approach communities with an understanding that people are going to articulate their own issues, and their own analysis, and their own needs, on their own terms. I think one of the failures of all forms of non-native work, or non-native solidarity work, has been to approach communities with a specific goal in mind. Which has been to approach communities and say, "Hey, this is what I want to do are you on board?" or "Hey, this is what I want to do, does this jive with where you're at?"

And I think, again, this idea of really flipping the script, it means very humbly and very responsibly approaching communities and say, "Hey, I'm here in the spirit of solidarity and, you know, if this is an invitation you want to accept, then what is it that you would like for me to do?"

And then, that's not to put the burden on indigenous communities only, right? There's a lot that non-natives can do: know the history of the land; know the protocols of the land; respect the protocols, and the communities, and the territories that we live on; educate ourselves and educate other people about the history of colonialism; hold our own governments accountable. A lot of indigenous communities are very clear in saying, "This is not my government system, this is your government system. You're responsible for holding these governments to account." The principle of – you know I'm in B.C. (British Columbia), which is unceded land. There's no treaties, [so it's important] for people who do come from treaty territories to know the treaties, and honor the treaties, and respect the settler side of the treaties, those are really key.

And so, you know, ... I would caution people of not putting the burden on other people to do the work, and tell us what to do; to do our own work in terms of education and awareness raising, but to also be very clear in terms of offering support and solidarity that's based on long term relationships and not ones that are based on trying to meet campaign goals.

And they are really based again on the principle of decolonization, which is to ensure that indigenous people are centered in our work; and that we are committed to the well-being of indigenous communities as a whole, not just based on one single issue because

indigenous communities really live at the intersectionality of a lot of forms of oppression, particularly within settler colonial contexts. I think that those are some really basic principles of allyship... Just committing to people's well-being and allying with people's own articulation of their needs ... I think that's a huge one because a lot of people have a predetermined understanding, and an idea, of what they want indigenous communities to work on.

And, you know, also ensuring that there's multiple lines of accountability, which is ensuring that people aren't tokenized, that people are in touch with, and meeting with, and allying with, and speaking with, and in relationship with, multiple people in a community, and ensuring that. And you know, honoring that diversity! Because one of the forms of tokenism that plays out a lot, not just in indigenous solidarity work, but, you know, within marginalized-communities-at-large, is this idea of like, "Oh, well so-and-so said one thing, and this other person in the community said another thing, and I don't know how to reconcile that." And, to me, that's a really racist idea because, of course people have different opinions, and to really honor diversity within communities and to not homogenize communities and to *definitely* not assume that there's like a "pan-native" kind of answer, right? Like each community again has their own protocols, has their own needs, and that specificity is really important to honor.

GM: Alright, thank you.

HW: Cool, thank you.

(Transcribed for Catalyst Project by Chris McNulty)