

Witness Radio, Episode 13

From the war in Ukraine to the U.S.-Mexico border and beyond: Who gets welcomed? Who gets to move?

Sarah: I'm thrilled to be starting a second season of Witness Radio and this Episode is a special treat.

I'm joined by Witness Radio Executive Producer, Camilo Perez-Bustillo, as well as Nandita Sharma and Reece Jones, both professors at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

Together, we explore the question:

From the war in Ukraine to the U.S.-Mexico border and beyond: Who gets welcome? Who gets to move?

Our conversation, recorded on March 31st 2002, was SO interesting, I thought it best to just dive right in.

So be sure to take a look at my guests' bios and book links below.

Enjoy the show!

RADIO WAVE

Sarah: I don't have to tell any of you that we live in an age of unprecedented global movement. There are over 281 million international migrants in the world today. Some, like the four of us, are lucky to experience freedom of movement and to have migrated by choice. But the global population of people displaced by violence, persecution, conflict, human rights atrocities, or events that seriously disturb the public order — like natural disasters related to climate change — was higher than ever before at the end of 2020, according to the UN refugee agency. The number then was 82.4 million, up from 70.8 million in 2018, which was up from a little over 43 million a decade before that. So the trend is only going in one direction. And that was before the war in Ukraine.

An associated trend is the building of barriers and fences and walls, as well as technological, infrastructure-based, and bureaucratic means to stop some people in their tracks or to deter them from coming at all. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, for example, there were 15 walls worldwide. As of 2018, that number had jumped to 77. It is more today.

As our guests have spent their careers studying and documenting in their works, border walls have given rise to state-sponsored violences, such as indefinite detention, forced disappearances, deaths at sea, desert deaths by dehydration, deportation in chains, most often back to harm, as the same barriers simultaneously embolden organized crime, creating markets that prey on the hopes and dreams of those seeking a better life. We see these phenomena on an upward trend as well,

particularly at the borders of the world's richest nations: the U.S., Europe and Australia, despite all their claims to believe in and respect human rights.

And then there was the war in Ukraine.

Since late February of this year, Russia's invasion of this sovereign nation has displaced internally an estimated 6.5 million people, and caused another four million, and counting, to flee. Considered refugees, they have found welcome in neighboring countries, as it should be! Including Poland, which as of March 26, 2022, had opened its doors to an estimated 2.2 million Ukrainians.

That's the same country that left three to four thousand Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis, fleeing similar perils, though labeled migrants, to freeze and starve to death in its border forests, as the 27 member states of the European Union looked on.

Meanwhile, in the last two years, 1.7 million people have been expelled by the U.S. without any due process under U.S. or international law due to the dubious use of a public health order called Title 42. That's vulnerable people flown back to the harms they fled, or pushed into violent Mexican border towns and left to fend for themselves. In the past year, an estimated 1,600 souls were left to drown in the Mediterranean Sea. Fewer Haitian refugees than would fit in a Texas football stadium were shackled, forced onto planes, and dropped back into a burning house. And less than 100 Cameroonian asylum seekers were sent back to the same harms Ukrainians have been forced to flee under egregious conditions in violation of myriad international human rights conventions.

So I'd like to kick off our discussion today with each of you in turn explaining to us how we got here. What are the historic dynamics at play in a world where some people forced to move, including children, are rejected, vilified, criminalized, and left to die, while others are welcomed with the dignity that all human beings deserve?

Reese perhaps you could start us off with a greater understanding of the concomitant development of maps and nations and the violence that results when the world is carved up and lines are drawn.

Reese Thanks, Sarah. That was a really great introduction. you did an excellent job of kind of laying out the current situation and the problems that we're facing at borders.

You know, I think we have the problem that we're often stuck in the lens of present-ism. That we are born into a particular world and the world that we're born into has the world political map: It has countries, it has this idea that those countries should have sovereignty over their territories and that they should be able to restrict movement at those borders. And that has been the case since most of us were born.

But if we take a longer historical view, the world looks nothing like that. This is a very unusual and unique period in the history of the world. And so what I try to do in my work is to try to think outside of that.

Historically, humans are migratory. We are a species that moves around the world and that's what our ancestors have done for generation after generation. For most of the history of humanity, we were hunter-gatherers, who were moving over a range, were using resources in that environment.

The idea of restricting the movement of other people arises with the idea of the state of an institution that has control over resources. There's a clear connection between the rise of groups of people claiming exclusive control over resources, over wealth, over land, and then the need to use violence to restrict other people from accessing those same places and land and resources.

Many early states were based on slavery, so they were using movement restrictions to extract wealth and value from other human beings and to profit off of that. What I've argued in some of my work in violent borders, for example, was that the system that we see today is very similar to that, but the scale has changed; that we see a similar sort of system where the wealth of the few in privileged places are protected through movement restrictions and limiting the ability of the poor to access opportunities in other places.

So in the past, that looked like slavery, that looked like poor laws, that looked like vagrancy laws. Today, that looks like borders, that looks like immigration laws. It looks like visas. It looks like walls. And it looks like the Border Patrol. But the result is the same thing. The privileges accrued by a few are protected by restricting the movement of others.

So maybe I'll pass it on to Nandita at this time to talk a little bit about nation and identity in that equation.

Nandita Thank you very much, Reese and Sarah, for getting us going. I think that we need to make a distinction between the formal organization of our world, which today is a world of nation states, each with their own immigration and citizenship laws that restrict rights on the basis of what status the nation state bestows upon you.

So, to distinguish between the formal organization of our world and how people actually live: Border controls, border walls, et cetera, haven't been able to actually stop movement. And I would argue, they're not necessarily designed to prevent movement, they are designed to sort out those people who have rights within the places that they live and work and those people who don't have rights in the places that they live and work.

A really important starting point when we're talking about this world and this enormous disconnect from how it's actually lived and how it's formally organized by nation states is nationalism.

Nationalism doesn't carry the same negative connotations that racism does, and I think that that is something that we need to change. We need to understand nationalism as dangerous as serious as life-destroying as racism. Nationalism is as powerful in organizing what happens to a person from birth to death, as is racism, particularly because this new global apartheid — that some people are able to live in the rich world, other people are trapped in the poor world — is largely organized through our general universal acceptance that nationalism is something to be proud of, both understandable and justifiable.

The problem is today that that kind of racism that we're outraged at is organized by regulations and restrictions on immigration and citizenship. We need to understand and take on as a major political project how it comes to make sense to us that we live in a world of border controls.

And so I think to start having that conversation, it's important to understand that the idea of nationality as the basis for self-determination and as a legitimate ground for exclusion is an outcome of a long history of racism. The formation of national identities was formed historically through the desire to create racialized communities of belonging and exclusion. So nationality is presented as some kind of race neutral category, but of course, it is far from that.

And we can see this through how racism was absolutely central to the formation of each and every single nation and subsequently nation-state in the world today.

The idea that it's OK, and in fact, it's desirable to live in a world composed of distinct and seemingly equivalent nationalities is precisely what is allowing Nation-States to effect racist exclusions without naming it as racism.

It's just this is how the world is, we all have our nation, we should all stay in it. Nation states have every right to determine who gets into their territories. That is precisely what we need to challenge if we have any hope of actually ending the racism that we're seeing today.

Sarah So let's come back to that. Camilo, take it away.

Camilo First, I want to stress how much I've learned from the work of Reese and Nandita. So for me, it's a privilege really to be able to to exchange here.

We're looking at the same global empires, the EU and the U.S. that systematically exclude and deny rights at their border, now project themselves as supposedly those who embrace those who need protection, as to Ukrainians, in the face of the realities that continue at the EU's borders, and what continues to happen at the US border.

When we speak from the perspective of peoples in movement, these categories of migrant, asylum seeker, refugee, are in effect, further constructions of what are machineries of exclusion and the way in which the U.S. has felt free, to continue to shut its doors, to continue to send back Haitians and Cameroonians and others and Central Americans, systematically, are the fruit of global empire, of global apartheid.

There are important legal and historical reasons why those categories exist of migrant, asylum seeker, refugee. But they're all distorted by these mechanisms, transformed into methods of exclusion.

I also want to respond quickly to Nandita's critique of nationalism. I think something we have to remember is that in the US and in Europe, the trend now is for those that we would normally categorize as anti-immigrant in terms of their thrust and the policies they promote, to defend themselves, saying that they're not being racist, they're simply being nationalist. That's what is a ground for convergence between Trump and Orban in Hungary and the current government in

Poland. That's the basis of their legitimacy, what they're defending is that nationalist impulse. And so nationalism is especially dangerous in that context.

I think the question is how is nationalism being used? Obviously the ways in which it's constitutive of continuing forms of exclusion. That is very different than the kind of nationalism that's been highlighted in terms of the struggle of the Kurdish people for self-determination, of the Palestinian people, et cetera.

Sarah I'm seeing you nod your head a lot Reese, so I'd love to turn it back to you. One thing that comes to mind is, we can have the delusion that what is happening today is unique and new and we can get outraged and fix it. But you lay out very, very carefully in "white borders" that this vilifying of the other that we don't want to include, really dates back to the founding of the nation. The same language that Trump used when he came down the golden escalator at Trump Tower and started his campaign was the same language used by congressmen to ensure that no more Chinese were allowed into the country.

Reese Yeah, in white borders, I try to start with the question: Was Trump and his language something unique to our period? Or is it something that's part of a much longer trend? And as you suggest, it definitely is part of a much longer trend.

What I argue in that book is that in the U.S., there was not a strong effort to restrict immigration into the country until non-white immigrants started to arrive at the borders and want to be members of the community. A lot of people are often surprised to learn that the U.S. didn't have any national immigration laws until the 1870s.

It wasn't until there was a large Chinese migration after the gold rush to California that the U.S. started to put rules on who could enter the country. The first of those is the Page Act of 1875 and followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prevented the Chinese immigration or sought to.

And what we see in the decades that followed that is as each new group of non-white immigrants start to arrive at the country's borders, new restrictions are put in place to limit those movements, while at the same time continuing to try to open up as much flow from northern Europe and from the U.K. as possible.

You look at the language of how people talked about Chinese immigration in the 1870s and 1880s, it's the same sort of metaphors that we see today. You hear about migrants bringing drugs. You hear about diseases coming with the Chinese. You hear about them taking jobs, but also being lazy and influencing white Americans not to work in the same sort of ways.

One word particularly that connects those different eras is language of invasion. And in the 1870s, the idea was that the Chinese immigrants weren't here just to work and be part of the United States. Instead, they were an invasion force. They were going to transform the country into something that it wasn't before that. So, yes, they're absolutely these connections throughout that period where immigration restrictions are fundamentally about racial exclusion, about limiting who can come into the country in order to construct an idea of who belongs in the nation.

Sarah What's interesting to me about the Chinese Exclusion Act is they didn't even try to hide their racism. Migrant "Protection" Protocols, we all know didn't protect anyone, but "Chinese Exclusion Act" says exactly what it did.

Nandita, if we resist the concept of nationalism, what happens to the concept of sovereignty?

Nandita If we are successful in challenging the tremendous hold that nationalism has on our imagination and therefore legitimizing a great deal of violence in the world, I would also like to see the end of sovereignty. I think one of the sad aspects of our history over the past 100 or so years is the belief that sovereignty is the basis for our liberation, that sovereignty is the basis for our protection. And that's really buying into a centuries old European treatise that we all enter into a contract with states willingly, voluntarily, in order to avoid a life of violence, because supposedly the state will protect us.

And we can see, speaking of Ukraine: national sovereignty in Ukraine has not protected people in Ukraine from war, from death and destruction. Sovereignty is not the basis of our power and protection. Our power and protection lies in our collective refusal to be governed. Our collective refusal to allow people to take our land, to exploit our labor, to put themselves in a position of authority over us, so this is very much an anarchist perspective, of course. But, going back to an earlier point that Reese made that was a great point is that all states, as long as there have been states, have tried to control people's mobility.

Nation states today generally don't really care about controlling people's exit from their territories. They're very much concerned about controlling entry into their territories. And so you cannot have national sovereignty without immigration controls because immigration controls is the mechanism by which to control who has rights within the territories that they're living and working.

I know that people get very concerned about what this means for people who are currently fighting for, quote-unquote, their national sovereignty, like people in Palestine, like Kurds, like Hawaiians. And what I would caution us when we're supporting those kinds of struggles is, life does not get better under national sovereignty. You only have to ask people in Honduras, people in India, people in Ukraine, what national sovereignty has accomplished for them. Did it protect them? No.

So I would caution us against saying that the nationalisms of the right are bad, the nationalisms of the left are good. I would caution against making that distinction because support for nationalism is the basis for exclusion. Support for nationalism is the basis of some of the most profound inequalities in the world today.

We can't escape that by saying that there are oppressed people fighting for nationalism. What we could do instead is to develop social movements that are much more capable of realizing freedom than our national sovereignty movement.

Sarah So, you can't really untie nationalism or nation states from sovereignty?

Nandita I mean, my parents were born as British subjects in the British colony of India. My grandparents were activists against British imperialism. And look at India today. India fought a very courageous anti-colonial battle and who won? Not the people in India. It was the people who rule India. It is the capitalists who are able to use the Indian state to rule.

Look at what is happening inside India, where more and more people are being culled as members of the Indian nation. So if you're Muslim, if you're Christian, if you're Parsi, if you're poor, you're being cast out of the idea of the nation.

So we really have to be very, very cautious about repeating history and saying Palestinian sovereignty, Kurdish sovereignty, Hawaiian sovereignty is somehow going to be different than all of the sovereignties that currently exists.

Sarah Right. So Camilo, shifting to you, I know you've been focused on how the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and really laid bare the problems endemic in a world turned into a global apartheid. Is it a Gordian knot that can be unraveled?

Camilo I think there are two layers I'd want to emphasize. I think one thing that's forgotten in this is the differentiation between national sovereignty and popular sovereignty.

And when I talk about popular sovereignty, it's what's referred to legally as the concept of self-determination, but it's become conflated with this idea of creating national states, not about building structures of autonomy that in fact are pushing against the edge of those states and seeking to transform them.

It's popular sovereignty, which is really what we're fighting for from the perspective of the groups that are excluded, by whatever mechanisms we're highlighting.

So one way to think about it is when we look at the world, the most generally excluded groups from international human rights are peoples in movement and indigenous peoples. Trying to bring together from a more integral perspective those groups that are normally classified or divided into migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, but also those forcibly displaced. The framework of forced migration on the one hand, but also the insistence, throughout the world, for the recognition of the rights to freedom of movement. That includes the right not to move, the right to stay home, independently of existing states. Not to depend on states, not to depend on nations as the vehicle.

So what we're talking about then is indigenous peoples as the ones who are promoting this critique, in their movements, and seeking to restructure existing states in terms of collective rights. And that's where we need to go. From an international system premised on nation states, which is the current international system, which has done nothing to protect the Ukrainian people or the Palestinians or the Kurds, I mean, just pick your example. But on the other hand, towards an international system based on the rights of peoples and popular sovereignty.

Sarah I'm just going to shift back to Nandita real quick because you talk about the development of the Commons as a solution out of this mess. Can you speak to that?

Nandita Yeah, thank you. I think that one of the things that we need to start with in that conversation is to distinguish between land and territory. Land is the basis of life. Land, air, water. Our planet is the basis of all life. Many times when people are talking about land, they really mean territory. I'm actually very troubled by the term 'peoples'. I think the idea of peoples is actually the foundational term for the idea of nations.

We live in a world where people imagine themselves as distinct people of a nation. And so I don't think that we just get away from the dangers and the violence of nationalism by calling it something else. Calling it popular sovereignty or calling it peoples' struggles.

The Commons does not talk about territory. It talks about land. The kind of Commons that I'm working towards is a planetary Commons. We imagine ourselves as somehow these, local people in these places, whereas each and every one of us on this planet is so deeply connected with everyone else and all life on it, that to talk about a Commons in just one place, and then other people can form their own Commons elsewhere, would reproduce many of the problems that we have today and would not correspond to the way that people actually live their lives today.

So this planetary Commons has not existed before. Of course, before there were states, there would have been commons across the world, but there wasn't a kind of collective imagination that we are together in a planetary commons. So the key distinction about the commons from every other political community, every other system of access to land and air and water, is that the foundational principle of the Commons is the right to not be excluded.

So can we form social movements that emanate from that principle, the right to not be excluded?

Some of the most powerful movements that I am really inspired by are people in movements who are refusing the state inscribed categories that they have been identified with, particularly refusing the distinction between migrant and citizen. And we see incredible efforts in that regard at the US-Mexico border, we see it throughout Central America with the caravans, we see it in the Mediterranean, we see it in the Aegean, we see it in the Indian Ocean, we see it around the world. Those are the movements that we could be amplifying. The rejection of nationalism, the rejection of state, the desire for a planetary commons, those we could be amplifying because they also exist. So I would encourage us to do that.

In addition to this incredibly differential treatment of people that we see according to how they have been racialized in the world today, I think that today nationalisms across the world, not just in Europe, not just in the rich world, not just in the United States or Australia or New Zealand, but across the world, in African nation states, in Asian nation states, in nation states in the Americas, in the Caribbean, in the Pacific. Many of them are actually centering their incredibly violent act around the category of indigeneity.

If you look at the discourse that preceded the Rwandan genocide, it was that the Hutus are the indigenous peoples of Rwanda, and they are being colonized, that the Tutsis were the migrant invaders. If you look at the genocide in Myanmar, it is precisely the discourse of indigeneity, that Burmese Buddhists, buddhist monks, the Burmese military, the Burmese state, explicitly saw Burmese Buddhists as the indigenous peoples of Myanmar, formerly Burma, and Rohingya people as, again, migrant invaders.

I would caution us against this easy slide into indigeneity as the basis of all that is good in the world, because some of the most violent acts in the world today, Cameroon, South Africa, Fiji, Uganda, is being done in the name of an indigenous people protecting themselves from an invading migrant horde. We see this with the Cherokee in the United States. We see this with Mohawks in Canada. The idea that if you are not genealogically related to some imagined prior Cherokee Nation or Mohawk Nation, that you can legitimately be expelled, you can be excluded, you can be cast out of that category.

These, I'm arguing, are all part and parcel of a nationalist way of thinking. Not all people who identify as indigenous are nationalist, but all indigenous nationalist movements are not going to produce different results than any other nationalist movement.

Reese The thing I would say: if you think about what a lot of our global problems are right now, what are the problems that we can't solve? It's things like climate change. And the issue is that we have a global environment, but we're trying to solve that on a state by state basis. This idea that individual groups of people can make the decision for their land and that's why we can't come up with a solution to solve this global problem.

We saw that with the pandemic. The pandemic is going to spread all around the world. But each nation state decided what to do for their own group of people. And we essentially deal with the failings of the least successful of those, which the US was one of. And so there are places like in the South Pacific, where places have had their first cases of COVID in the last couple of weeks because they successfully avoided it for a very long period of time. But nevertheless, the failures elsewhere still get back to them.

The same thing with the movement of people. We have a global economic system. We have a mobile species. But nevertheless we give individual states, groups of people, nations, this right to control who can enter and move between territories.

So in each of those instances, we have a global phenomenon, we're trying to solve on a state by state basis. And it's going to continuously fail until we recognize the flaws of that particular formulation of power that we have in the world today. And instead, we start thinking towards a global commons like Nandita is talking about.

We need to think of these things in a global sense because we live in a globalized world, but we as of yet don't have a global political system, and we don't have a global sense of morality.

We often have a nationalist sense of morality, and maybe I can quickly transition that to talk about Ukraine because I think that's exposed that so clearly.

We've been hearing for years that the U.S. and the EU can't possibly handle all of these refugees, migrants, showing up at their borders. In the EU, 1.5 million people showed up in 2015. And it was this crisis, catastrophe, that can no way possibly be handled. But somehow, in a one month period, the EU has taken in 4 million people without any planning at all. That was a lie always and still is a lie, that there is not a possibility to handle the movement of people. It's very possible to do it, it's about the desire to do it.

But it also showed the racism of it, too. That it really is that borders and immigration restrictions are about this exclusion of who belongs, and I think the racialization of who is allowed in and who is excluded has become so obvious with this issue.

So whether that portends an improvement of this in the future, I'm not so sure. But it definitely has proved the point that those of us sitting here in this panel have been making for years about the roles that immigration restrictions play as a proxy for racism.

Sarah I think this is a great way to zoom toward the end. I did want to ask all of you to comment on, are you encouraged by what's happening in Europe with regard to the welcome with dignity of Ukrainian refugees? Is it something we can replicate and use to try to unravel the Gordian knot at the intersection of global capitalism and racialized border relations? Or do you fear that once the war is over, we're just going to go back to the status quo?

I agree 100 percent that moving toward a kind of global commons is really our only hope in a world fraught with, you know, diseases that know no borders and global warming.

Can we undo the nation state and leave behind the structures that are keeping borders alive and well? Is this a moment that we can harness and move toward the future?

Nandita I think any moment is the moment to start improving. So the hypocrisy that has been uncovered with the differential treatment of people fleeing Ukraine and the differential treatment of which people were fleeing Ukraine, were they white Ukrainian nationals or were they not white non-Ukrainian nationals.

But I would at the same time say that the experience of seeking a safer place to live that people in Ukraine are going through right now is the bare minimum that every human being on this planet should be expecting. And that would be the great basis for a revitalized movement for the freedom to move.

The freedom to move is the basis of a movement that is capable of leading us to a planetary Commons. It is also not a new movement. It is the inheritor of the anti-slavery movement. It is the inheritor of the anti-enclosure movement, right? It is the inheritor of feminist movements. It is the inheritor of anti-colonial movements. The freedom to move has been an age-old struggle, and it is taking the form that it's taking today because national immigration and citizenship controls are the basis of so much inequality and disparity in the world.

But simply calling for the freedom of movement can get us to the Commons.

Sarah OK, great. There is a good takeaway. Camilo, you want to add?

Camilo I think the only encouraging thing about Ukraine is it creates a new floor for us, a minimum, which is: whatever was done to welcome Ukrainians, has to be done for everyone at every border, starting with the US border and with Mexico's southern border. The emphasis has to be on the critique of nationalism, of global capitalism, of global empire. But more than anything else, this affirmation of the right to freedom of movement as what we normally think of as immigrant rights.

It's the right to freedom of movement, globally and at every border. And until we have that, we don't even have the semblance of global justice or of a planetary commons. That's how we get there.

Sarah OK, great. Love it. Reese, you want to finish this off?

Reese I will just reiterate what they said. I think we are at an important moment and I think that we're having a lot more conversations about the violence of borders and the right to move than we were having 5, 10, 15 years ago. And so I'm optimistic in that sense that it's something that is part of the conversation now. But I think I am pessimistic that in the short term that there's going to be any major changes in that area. But we need to keep pushing for it. The freedom of movement is a fundamental right that we should all be pursuing, and a lot of other rights emerge from that.

Sarah Wonderful. This has been such a great discussion. Thank you so much. I encourage all of you to go out and buy their books and really dig into all that they've been talking about. Enjoy your days and I hope to be in touch with you very soon.

Nandita Thank you. Thank you, everybody.

Reese Thank you.

Camilo Thank you, Nandita, Reese, Sarah, un abrazo. Thank you.