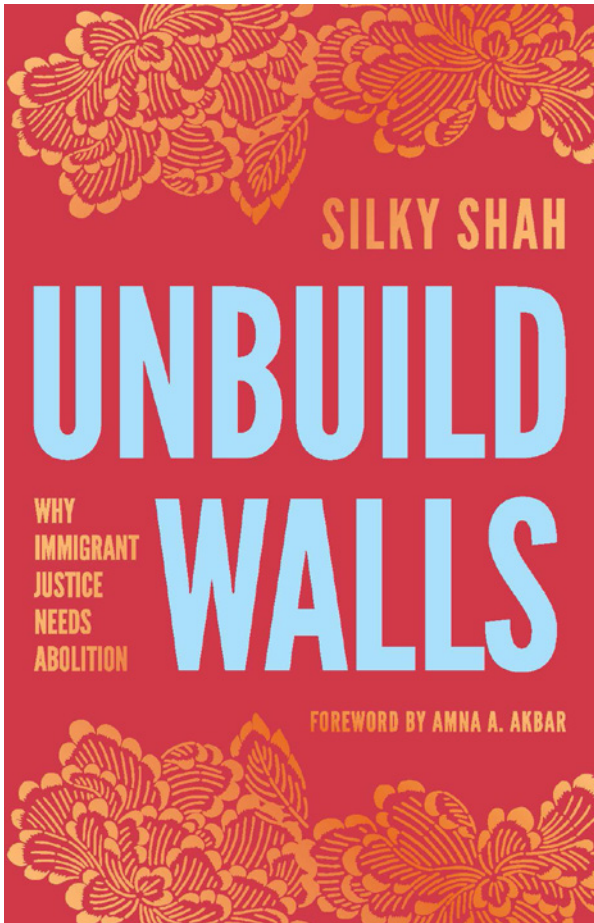


## Reading & Discussion Guide



### About the Book

In the wake of post-9/11 xenophobia, Obama's record-level deportations, Trump's immigration policies, and the 2020 uprisings for racial justice, the US remains entrenched in a circular discourse regarding migrant justice. As organizer Silky Shah argues in *Unbuild Walls*, we must move beyond building nicer cages or advocating for comprehensive immigration reform. Our only hope for creating a liberated society for all, she insists, is abolition.

*Unbuild Walls* dives into US immigration policy and its relationship to mass incarceration, from the last forty years up to the present, showing how the prison-industrial complex and immigration enforcement are intertwined systems of repression. Incorporating historical and legal analyses, Shah's personal experience as an organizer, as well as stories of people, campaigns, organizations, and localities that have resisted detention and deportation, Shah assesses the movement's strategies, challenges, successes, and shortcomings. Featuring a foreword by Amna A. Akbar, *Unbuild Walls* is an expansive and radical intervention, bridging the gaps between movements for immigrant rights, racial justice, and prison abolition.

Drawing from over twenty years of activism on local and national levels, this striking book offers an organizer's perspective on the intersections of immigrant rights, racial justice, and prison abolition.

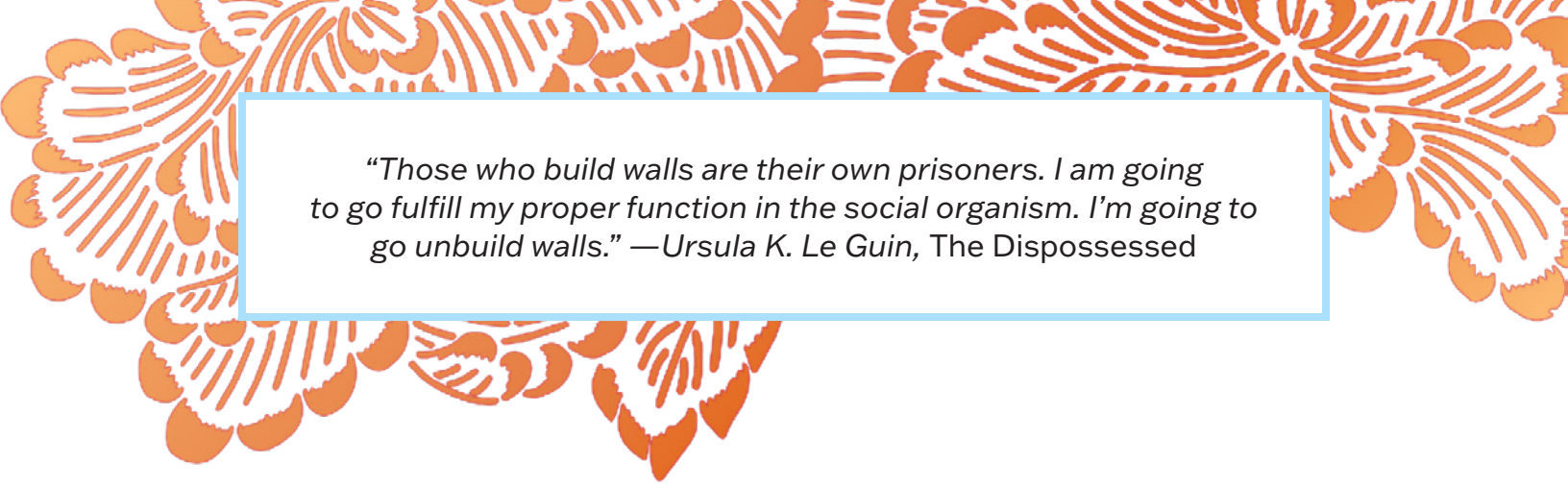
### About the Author

Silky Shah has been working as an organizer on issues related to racial and migrant justice for over two decades. Originally from Texas, she began fighting the expansion of immigrant jails on the US-Mexico border in the aftermath of 9/11. In 2009, she joined the staff of Detention Watch Network, a national coalition building power to abolish immigrant detention in the United States, and now serves as its executive director. Her writing on immigration policy and organizing has been published in *Truthout*, *Teen Vogue*, *Inquest*, and *The Forge* and in the edited volumes, *The Jail is Everywhere* (Verso, 2024), *Resisting Borders and Technologies of Violence* (Haymarket Books, 2024), and *Transformative Planning* (Black Rose Books, 2020). She has also appeared in numerous national and local media outlets including *The Washington Post*, *NPR*, and *MSNBC*.



DETENTION  
WATCH NETWORK

Check out more opportunities to get involved with Detention Watch Network and *Unbuild Walls*: <https://linktr.ee/unbuildwalls>.



*“Those who build walls are their own prisoners. I am going to go fulfill my proper function in the social organism. I’m going to go unbuild walls.” —Ursula K. Le Guin, The Dispossessed*

## Foreword | Amna A. Akbar


1. How does Amna A. Akbar describe the “popular rebirth of radical imagination” in 2020? How does she articulate the importance of critique, horizon, and practice for social change? When did you first encounter radical critiques of prisons, police, and capitalism? How have you witnessed overlap between critique, horizon, and practice? What are some of the tensions and challenges that emerge when there isn’t a balance between critique, horizon, and practice?

*“In [Shah’s] telling of the immigrant justice movement, we see the necessity of what organizers and activists in the Stop Cop City campaign call “multiple grammars of struggle” to build strong movements—and movements of movements—to take on and win on the urgent questions of our times. The difficult work of building solidarity makes us stronger.” — Amna A. Akbar*

## Prologue

2. How did the Detention Watch Network (DWN) take action during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic? What were some of the strategic questions they asked to guide their work?
3. How did the call to #FreeThemAll spread throughout the movement to end immigrant detention and other forms of incarceration? What were some of the creative ways that people joined the #FreeThemAll campaign? What does this teach us about how to keep people engaged beyond the catalyst moment?

*In these moments, we must ask ourselves: What is our analysis of why this is happening? What solution are we offering? Is there a path toward that solution? What is the most useful direct action for people to take?*



*If our goal is justice for immigrants and nonimmigrants alike, we must be willing to go further and embrace abolition of the prison industrial complex as a whole. Understanding the relationship between immigration enforcement and the criminal legal system is a critical part of the abolitionist struggle.*

## Introduction

4. In what ways has rising social inequality contributed to the expansion of the prison industrial complex? How does Jesse Jerome Dean Jr.'s story illustrate the interconnectedness of the PIC and the US immigration enforcement system?
5. How is discourse about immigration in the US impacted by current economic and political conditions? Where have you seen narratives that focus on “good” vs. “bad” immigrants? What are the effects of this framing on the immigrant justice struggle and the movement for racial justice? Why is it critical to unbuild walls between movements for social change?

What are some of the ways to unbuild a wall? Brainstorm a list of methods for literally or figuratively unbuilding walls. Try not to let your sense of logic get in the way—think creatively about the tools, skills, people, practices, strategies, and words that could have the power to bring a wall down.

## Chapter 1: The US Prison Boom and the Growth of Immigrant Detention

6. How did the war on crime and racial tensions contribute to the federal government's response to immigration? How can understanding the history and growth of the prison industrial complex in the United States help to more effectively dismantle immigrant detention?
7. How have legislative changes—including welfare reform, the crime bill, and the 1996 immigration laws—deepened the fusion between the criminal legal system and the immigration enforcement system? How did this legislation lead to the growth of detention and deportations?

*Immigrant detention is part of the broader carceral landscape in the United States, and thus abolition of immigrant detention must be seen as concurrent with the demand to abolish the prison industrial complex.*

8. What are some of the ways that immigration enforcement infrastructure was expanded in the wake of 9/11? How were relationships between the federal government and local counties strengthened in order to expand immigration detention? What role did sheriff's departments play in the expansion of the deportation machine?


Trace your family's experience of migration. When did your relatives arrive in the country where you were born? Where did they come from and how did they arrive? What difficulties might they have faced during their journey? What did they experience from the community they arrived in and how may it have been welcoming or hostile?

*Heightened conditions—neoliberalism, anti-immigrant sentiment, tough-on-crime rhetoric, and national security initiatives—created the perfect storm for building up the prison industrial complex and deportation machine to levels never seen before.*

## Chapter 2: Obama, Criminalization, and the Limits of Reform

9. How did the narrative around immigrants evolve during former president Obama's tenure? How did this narrative pave the way for further criminalization, an increase in deportations, and Republican attacks on immigrants?
10. What are some examples of reformist reforms to the US immigration enforcement system? In what ways do reformist reforms legitimize and expand prison and detention?
11. What are some of the ways that ICE and the police collaborate together? How do government practices of data sharing and increased surveillance expand criminalization and deportations?
12. How do alternatives to detention and evolving technology—including risk assessment tools, electronic monitoring, and case management—expand the reach of the carceral system? Why do these types of reforms fail to reduce the number of people incarcerated?

Write a 1-2 paragraph description of current US immigration policy without using any of the following words or their synonyms: *border / citizen / criminal / detention / ICE / immigrant / police / wall / war*. What did you notice as you were writing? Were there any words you were surprised to include?



*By accepting that the use of the criminal legal system for targeting immigrants was tolerable and warranted, the immigrant rights movement treated the PIC as natural and normal, rather than a source of injustice. The reforms proposed further fortified both the criminal legal system and the immigration enforcement systems, leading to more deportations. Beyond that, the Obama administration expanded and set up a powerful machinery for Trump to exploit by plugging in the detention and deportation system much more closely to criminal law enforcement across the country.*

## Chapter 3: Deterring the Crisis: Prosecutions, Prisons, and the United States-Mexico Border

13. How did family separations during the Trump administration become a flashpoint in the immigrant justice movement? Did liberal critiques of Trump’s immigration policies address harmful policies set by previous administrations?
14. How has the “border crisis” evolved as a right-wing project? What roles did the mainstream media and the Democratic Party play in the massive increase in spending on prisons, surveillance, and the military? What are some tools and tactics that can be used to disrupt the narrative of “chaos” at the border?

*As we advocate for humane treatment of migrants seeking refuge and for those living in border communities, we must address the ways that the prison system and border militarization are intertwined. The issue goes far beyond ICE, and even beyond DHS. The Justice Department and a host of local and state agencies play a role in keeping the situation at the border carceral. Building power to defund those agencies and repeal the laws that have imprisoned thousands of migrants each year for the act of crossing the border will be critical to rolling back the reach of the prison industrial complex, at the border and beyond.*

15. How did the war on drugs and the war on crime impact the number of immigrant prosecutions? How were these prosecutions further exacerbated by a focus on deterrence?

Learn more about the borders in your region. How were these borders created? How are people living on both sides of these borders impacted by this geographic separation? What other forms of separation—in language, culture, resources, employment—exist in your region?

*Often the liberal critique of Trump’s immigration policy sees him and his administration as an aberration, a departure from the basic norms of governing. This perspective ignores the fact that many of his policies were continuations and expansions of what previous administrations, especially since Clinton, had been seeding: the use of the criminal legal system to punish immigrants as a tool for deterring future migration.*

## Chapter 4: From Legalization to Racial Justice: The Evolution of a Movement

16. What are some of the limitations of Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR)? Do CIR efforts address the root causes of immigration in the US? Why or why not?
17. How did the Not1More Deportation campaign expose the detention and deportation pipeline? What was the campaign's analysis of the CIR framework?
18. How is militarization at the border intertwined with CIR? What has been the impact of many immigrant rights groups accepting harmful provisions in exchange for legislation that supports legalization?
19. How did the immigrant rights movement push back on Trump's agenda to criminalize and deport immigrants? How was this further bolstered by the addition of new sanctuary policies?

Find a recent news article about US immigration policy that includes a photograph. The photograph could be of a border wall, a landscape, or a person or family. Imagine that this image is included in a history book in the year 2074. In your own words, write a paragraph that describes this moment in time and what it may mean 50 years from today.

*At both the local and federal level, a multifaceted approach to ensure the greatest rights to noncitizens should be the goal. Those actions include eliminating the fear of detention and deportation, advocating for a living wage and nonexploitative working conditions, providing access to public benefits, and ensuring the ability to travel outside the United States and return.*

## Chapter 5: Private Prisons and the Demand to Defund

20. Why do immigrant rights activists often focus attention on the harms of private prisons? How has the focus on private prisons created a division between the immigrant rights movement and the broader movement to abolish prisons? How might this division be eliminated in order to unite both movements?

*The attention on the government and how it spends its money has been essential to addressing the exponential growth of the PIC and broadening our focus beyond private prisons. Nefarious actors are easier to shame and are often easier to expose than a massive state infrastructure rooted in racism and white supremacy carrying out a carceral and deportation agenda in partnership with whomever is willing. The closure of the BOP's private prisons is a good thing. But the problem with these prisons wasn't solely that they were private, but that they existed in the first place.*

21. What were the conditions that led to the Federal Bureau of Prisons phasing out private prisons? What are some key takeaways from this shift that could support current movements?
22. How did the Defund Hate campaign work to expose the role of appropriations in detention and deportation? What were some of the tactics the campaign used to build movement literacy?

Take a closer look at how much your local community spends on prisons and jails. How much does your county and your state spend on incarceration vs. education and other social supports? What actions can you take to influence your community's budget and spending?

*Private prisons may not be a key driver of mass incarceration; however, the economy in which prisons exist remains a central reason for keeping so many people locked up.*



## Chapter 6: Communities Not Cages

23. How have grassroots campaigns successfully prevented and stopped detention contracts and passed state legislation to work toward the end of detention? Why do abolitionists argue that detention centers should close regardless of their location?
24. Why did the Detention Watch Network (DWN) shift to a framework of detention abolition? What were some of the tactics and strategies of DWN's Communities Not Cages campaign?
25. Why was 2020 such a pivotal year for building the case against detention? How did organizing efforts in California support important wins and movement-building across the country?
26. What are some lessons from the fight to end detention at the Hudson County Jail? What is carceral humanism and why is it so harmful?

Write a love letter to a comrade in the immigrant justice movement who is experiencing burnout. What would you say to help them through this period? What stories could you offer them? What kind of world are you working on building together?

*While the campaign against family detention has been perceived by some activists as a more sympathetic and therefore acceptable cause, it was an important laboratory for developing abolitionist strategies and tactics. The choice to focus on specific facilities, the call for shutdown, and the multipronged campaigns incorporating organizing, legal, and advocacy tactics proved to be the most effective strategy and one that has been replicated in localities across the country.*

## Chapter 7: Abolitionist Approaches to System Change

27. What are some of the pitfalls of focusing organizing efforts on private prisons, detention transfers, and the right to an attorney? What role can non-reformist reforms play in building abolitionist strategies?
28. Based on the abolitionist steps to ending detention that Silky Shah outlined in this chapter, what are some concrete actions that you can take in your community? Are there any local campaigns in your community that strengthen the broader case for ending immigrant detention in the United States?

Spend 10 or more minutes freewriting about a world without prisons and deportations. What is your personal vision for a world where everyone is able to thrive? What are the relationships, resources, structures, and ways of being that could support a just and humane world?

*As the demand for abolition asserts, creating a more humane world will require us to not just tear down our current systems but also build a society in which everyone is valued and able to thrive. It is in these conditions that we will finally achieve racial and migrant justice. In the meantime, we can organize to make life better for immigrants and those seeking to migrate by limiting the reach of the prison industrial complex and chipping away at its structure.*

## Chapter 8: Beyond “Abolish ICE”

29. Why is it critical to take an intersectional internationalist approach within the immigrant justice movement? What lessons have you learned from global solidarity movements for racial and economic justice? How can those lessons help us strategize around broader social inequities in the US?
30. What are some of the points of convergence for the immigrant justice and prison abolition movements? How can the just transition and invest/divest frameworks help us organize across movements and dismantle the carceral economy?

Draw a map that illustrates the connections between immigration detention centers and prisons. What are the connections that you or other organizers in your community are targeting? Which connections seem out of reach? What resources would you need to focus on those connections?

*The moral panic around the border now drives most policy decisions on immigration. In our work for migrant justice, it is critical that we challenge the right-wing fearmongering about the border in order to create safer conditions for people wanting to migrate. The immigrant rights struggle is inherently an intersectional struggle.*



# Resources

## Organizations & Groups

Detention Watch Network is a national coalition building power through collective advocacy, grassroots organizing, and strategic communications to abolish immigration detention in the United States. To find a member organization near you please visit DWN's membership directory: <https://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/about/membership-directory>.

Learn more about organizations working at the intersection of racial and migrant justice:

Asian Prisoner Support Committee  
<https://www.asianprisonersupport.com>

Mijente  
<https://mijente.net>

Black Alliance for Just Immigration  
<https://baji.org>

Muslims for Just Futures  
<https://www.muslimsforjustfutures.org>

Critical Resistance  
<https://criticalresistance.org>

National Day Laborer Organizing Network  
<https://ndlon.org>

Community Justice Exchange  
<https://www.communityjusticeexchange.org>

National Immigrant Justice Center  
<https://immigrantjustice.org>

Freedom for Immigrants  
<https://www.freedomforimmigrants.org>

Organized Communities Against Deportations  
<https://www.organizedcommunities.org>

Grassroots Leadership  
<https://www.grassrootsleadership.org>

Tsuru for Solidarity  
<https://tsuruforsolidarity.org>

Immigrant Defense Project  
<https://www.immigrantdefenseproject.org>

UndocuBlack Network  
<https://undocublack.org>

Immigrant Legal Resource Center  
<https://www.ilrc.org>

United We Dream  
<https://unitedwedream.org>

## Readings & Tools

[Ending Immigration Detention: Abolitionist Steps vs. Reformist Reforms](#)  
[chart by Detention Watch Network]

[Reformist reforms vs. abolitionist steps to end imprisonment](#)  
[poster by Critical Resistance]

[From Data Criminalization to Prison Abolition](#)  
[a project of Community Justice Exchange]

