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## Review Essay: Centering Climate Disaster: A Labor Immigration Driving Force

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**Abstract:** Labor migration is predominately studied through anthropocentric modes of analysis. This review essay explores, demonstrates, and argues that the environment and climate disaster can be driving forces of labor migration. While the scholarship explored as part of this essay, including text, a documentary, and photographs, demonstrate how non-human assemblages, climate and the environment, impact labor and subsequently the family unit and migration, they also call attention to the Anthropocene, the current moment that we occupy as humans as the dominant influence on climate and the environment. Given the impact of climate disaster on labor migration, it is important to decenter past anthropocentric modes of analysis focused on socioeconomic disparities.

**Keywords:** Labor, migration, environment, climate disaster, Anthropocene

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### Introduction

I am a labor immigration historian who utilizes anthropocentric modes of analysis. I study the generational and racial legacies of U.S. agricultural guestworker programs. I first came to this topic at my southern California undergraduate institution as a Psychology and Chicana/o Studies double-major, arguably anthropocentric majors. However, scholars of the latter, such as Stevie Ruiz, Federico Castillo, and Devon G. Peña, are charting new intersections in the field concerning the environment. As a grandchild of a former Bracero (Mexican guestworker), I instinctively approach my research through centering the human and personal experience. While I have thought of border phenomena and practices in relation to globalization and the treatment that guestworkers face, I previously neglected to examine labor immigration from an environmental perspective. As I will demonstrate and argue through the following analysis, the environment is a key factor of labor immigration that can no longer be overlooked. While all the selected scholarship demonstrate how non-human assemblages, climate and the environment, impact labor and subsequently the family unit and migration, they also call attention to the Anthropocene, the current moment that we occupy as humans as the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

Labor migration is predominately studied through anthropocentric modes of analysis. Sociologists like Douglas S. Massey have theorized the causes of international labor migration by highlighting economic disparities between sending and receiving countries, what many refer to as 'push and pull factors'. Historians, such as Mae Ngai, have detailed how U.S. preferences for docile guestworkers have exponentially increased labor immigration to the U.S. While immigration scholars, like Maria Cristina García, who through her forthcoming book, *Climate Refugees: The Environmental Origins*

*of Refugee Migrations*, are beginning to study climate refugee migration, few have considered the role of climate disaster as a driving force of labor migration. Though the secondary scholarship on this topic is in its early stages in academia, non-governmental organizations and think tanks have explored the subject. Given the impact of climate disaster on labor migration, it is important to decenter past anthropocentric modes of analysis focused on socioeconomic disparities.

### Environment and Immigration

In an exploration of the nexus of environment and immigration, Jon Hultgren's 2015 book, *Border Walls Gone Green: Nature and Anti-Immigrant Politics in America*, traces how environmental protection became a mechanism to enforce U.S. borders and anti-immigrant rhetoric. While the environment is centered against the human, blaming environmental degradation on immigrants remains an anthropocentric mode of analysis. In the introduction, Hultgren explains how a nativist organization utilized Earth Day to call for immigration restriction: "In celebration of Earth Day, the immigration-reduction organization Californians for Population Stabilization (CAPS) had launched a national advertising campaign aimed at persuading the American left that immigration is a driving force behind the contemporary global ecological crisis" (1). This flawed anthropocentric argument reveals the organization's ignorance to consider the causes of immigration that could be influenced by environmental degradation in immigrants' home areas, most likely brought on by human forces who in most cases are not those forced to migrate. CAPS' claim echoes the scholarly literature's teleological tendencies that prioritize anthropocentric modes of analysis by focusing on economic disparities. The existing labor immigration

scholarship and environmental protection immigration reduction organizations like CAPS have failed to consider the reverse, the global ecological crisis as a driving force of labor immigration.

### Climate Refugees and Labor

While María Cristina García's book, *Climate Refugees: The Environmental Origins of Refugee Migrations*, is forthcoming, she spoke about it in a recent interview as part of a *Cornell Research* article titled, "Migration, Forced by Climate Change" by Jackie Swift. In the interview, García explains that "People have been displaced by climate for millennia, but we are now at a particular historical moment, facing a new type of environmentally driven migration that will be more fast and furious. It will require incredible adaptability and political will to keep up with the changes that are forecasted to happen." García's call for adaptability and political will also call on the academy to join her in seriously considering environmentally driven migration, specifically refugees of climate change, but who are not formally recognized as refugees. The lack of international recognition and protection that García states climate refugees face reveals the academy's lack of attention to this group and subsequent factors, such as labor immigration. The more attention the group is given within the academy, the stronger the force will be to call for and provide international attention and protection to climate refugees.

García then explains that her book examines "case studies of people in the Americas who have been displaced because of environmental factors, especially populations from Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, and the Caribbean island of Montserrat." García's focus on Haiti, Mexico, and the Caribbean is particularly interesting when considering that these locations have historically contributed a large portion of agricultural guestworkers to the U.S. Given their historical labor migration to the U.S., when prompted by climate change, these groups will likely view the U.S. as a refuge and subsequently become integrated into the labor economy—making climate a key factor in labor immigration.

When asked about answers to climate problems, "García points to Vietnam where the government is experimenting with different forms of water, crop, and soil management as an answer to the salinization of the Mekong Delta." García's response regarding nations' creative answers to climate problems begs the question of how such governmental reactions and presumed solutions subsequently impact local labor economies. Although these governmental solutions are in reaction to climate change and the environment, we must acknowledge the Anthropocene, human beings as the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

### The Anthropocene and Labor

Kasia Paprocki's 2019 article, "All that Is Solid Melts into the Bay: Anticipatory Ruination on Bangladesh's Climate Frontier," demonstrates how government-sanctioned ruination in anticipation of and preparation for a climate disaster both erases and creates labor. This transaction of labor destroys livelihoods, disturbs family units, and ultimately engenders migration. Paprocki considers the repercussions of a local Bangladesh government's decision to replace rice farming with shrimp aquaculture in preparation for rising sea levels:

Anticipatory ruination works not only through the claims to possible futures through shrimp production but also through the destruction of imaginations of alternative futures, such as the persistence of agriculture and the communities in Khulna that depend on it. The sense of inevitable crisis thus dialectically anticipates and produces ruination (28).

Anticipatory ruination inevitably impacts labor as it simultaneously destroys Khulna's predominant labor economy, agriculture, and creates another, shrimp aquaculture. As Paprocki argues, anticipatory ruination can be devastating for a community that will consequently face labor opportunity reduction due to less intensive labor requirements and the necessity to learn new labor practices. Such devastating labor reduction will inevitably engender migration as a means of survival. This labor devastation calls attention to the fact that as the International Labour Organization states, "The sectors that employ the majority of workers are also some of the most vulnerable to climate change." As agricultural laborers, Khulna's rice farmers comprised the largest group of laborers and as demonstrated, they were most vulnerable to the ruination in anticipation of climate disaster. Khulna's rice farmers are not an isolated case, rather they represent the larger issue that agricultural laborers are inevitably and arguably the largest group of laborers most impacted by climate disaster.

### Climate and Geographic Disasters Create Gendered Labor Division

Paprocki also sheds light on anticipatory ruinations' impact on the gendered and economic division of labor: "These impacts have been felt most acutely by women as well as the majority landless populations who have historically worked as sharecroppers and agricultural day labourers in the region" (35). While human assemblages impose this form of labor devastation in preparation for the effects of a non-human assemblage, a climate disaster, we must also consider when human assemblages cannot intervene in anticipation and legal labor alternatives are not put forth by local governments.

Sourav Sarangi's 2012 film, *Char: No Man's Land*, documents

the livelihood of the inhabitants of Char, a fragile island created when the river Ganga rapidly changed course following the construction of Farakka Dam in 1975. Victims of a geographic catastrophe brought on by human assemblages who sought to create the dam, families engage in gendered labor economies that require daily migration. Men and boys engage in the rice black market, smuggling rice to Bangladesh. Women smuggle Phensedyl Cough Syrup from India into Char. As a means of survival, this labor requires a young boy to forfeit his education, and his sister's marriage is commodified for the groom's family's financial gain. Both issues demonstrate how geographic catastrophes require a change in human priorities and labor practices. A mother who is frequently stopped and apprehended by the Border Patrol for smuggling Phensedyl states, "No work is sinful, it is between need and greed." This mother combats border policing practices by condemning the imposed morality on their forced livelihood. The act of labor that constructed the dam, which brought ecological devastation that resulted in gendered labor division and illegal smuggling as a means of survival, demands that we turn to the Anthropocene again, human labor's impact on the natural environment and subsequently, the local labor economy. As I have proven, this is a cycle driven by the Anthropocene.

### Full Circle: Human Labor's Impact on the Natural Environment

Kirstyn M. Andrews' 2019 photo essay, "Borderwaters: Conversing with Fluidity at the Dominican Border," not only further emphasizes how climate and geography as non-human assemblages can create and dismantle labor opportunities but also documents human labor's impact on the natural environment. Andrews demonstrates how non-human assemblages overpower the border practices enforced by human assemblages: "While political whims and tensions spark increased militarization or heavy press coverage of the bor-

der from the Dominican side, the Artibonite has a logic of its own, canceling market days with heavy rains and flooding, or facilitating trade in the dry season when one can wade across the border" (7). The Artibonite's power to create and erase labor daily is another example of why we must consider labor immigration from an environmental and climate perspective. Though Andrews simultaneously prompts us to consider the reverse, the impacts of human labor on the environment: "The bank is steep and often muddy from constant foot traffic on market days" (11). Recognizing the impact of human assemblages on climate and the global ecological crisis, we must anticipate how human assemblages and forms of labor can cause climate catastrophes that will, in return, impact labor—as is the case with Char and Khulna.

### Conclusion

Labor history is essentially humancentric and has been traditionally examined in terms of immigrant labor. As a scholar, I am a product of this process. However, through this piece I have focused on the impact of non-human assemblages, climate and environment, on human assemblages and their labor economies. In doing so, I also call attention to the role of the Anthropocene in this cycle of climate and environment impacting labor, and human labor impacting climate and environment. The groups that are most often targeted in anti-immigration and nativist sentiments are agricultural laborers. Agricultural laborers are especially vulnerable to climate and environmental disasters. By calling attention to this feedback loop, I demonstrate that we, the academic assemblage, can no longer ignore climate and environment as part of labor migration and immigration. Contemporary rapid climate change demands an interdisciplinary engagement from labor scholars, a political-ecological labor history that is socioenvironmental.

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