FEATURE

Climate Migration and the Right to Exclude

Dan Boscov-Ellen

> American liberals may demand an end to excessive violence against Latinx migrants and refugees . . . but they rarely locate immigration and border policies within broader systemic forces. A long arc of dirty colonial coups, capitalist trade agreements extracting land and labor, climate change, and enforced oppression is the primary driver of displacement from Mexico and Central America. Migration is a predictable consequence of these displacements, yet today the US is fortifying its border against the very people impacted by its own policies. Analyzing the border as part of historic and contemporary imperial relations . . . forces a shift from notions of charity and humanitarianism to restitution, reparations, and responsibility.
>
> —Harsha Walia
> *Border and Rule*[1]

That sovereign nation-states have the right to exclude most nonmembers is largely assumed in both popular political discourse and mainstream political and legal theory; Joseph Carens has aptly dubbed this "the conventional moral view on immigration."[2] The ubiquity of this view means that it is often treated as obvious rather than argued for,[3] but the political thinkers who do argue for it often stress its deep normative import, portraying a nation's control over its borders as indispensable to collective self-determination and so as constituting a core pillar of democratic political sovereignty. Accordingly, as E. Tendayi Achiume suggests, both "the governing law and the dominant ethics that underpin

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it" view the barring of outsiders as "not only permissible but even righteous as a matter of sovereign self-determination."[4]

The conventional view has remained hegemonic in the face of strong philosophical criticism.[5] Yet emerging realities are now raising pressing questions about states' broad discretion over immigration, as well as the understanding of sovereignty to which it is conceptually bound.[6] Foremost among these new realities[7] is the increasingly consequential phenomenon of climate-related displacement and migration. Although the links between climate change and human movement are complex and context dependent,[8] studies suggest that climate change already centrally contributes to the displacement of tens of millions of people each year,[9] and is likely to contribute to the displacement of many millions more in the coming decades.[10] The repercussions of this dynamic have not yet been adequately integrated into the wider political theory literature,[11] but several normative theorists of mobility and migration have begun to articulate its potential import for immigration ethics.[12] The argument I develop here adds to this growing body of literature by probing the limits of the conventional view—as well as some of its critical counterparts—in dealing with certain instances of climate-related displacement and migration. Specifically, I will attempt to show that many climate migrants are owed admission as reparation for injustice, and that the character of this injustice raises broader challenges for the conventional view.

In making this argument, I build on another conviction that is widely held in political theory (even by proponents of the conventional view)—namely, that states do not have an equally broad right to exclude those whose displacement they have precipitated. This idea also has intuitive appeal in mainstream political discourse. For instance, in response to Joe Biden and Kamala Harris threatening Central American migrants with removal under the Trump-era Title 42 expulsion (which bypassed due process for asylum seekers under the pretext of "public health"), Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recently asserted that "we can't help set someone's house on fire and then blame them for fleeing."[13]

Ocasio-Cortez's statement, which made national headlines and was shared widely across social media, pointed specifically to the U.S. history of economic and political destabilization in Central America and did not discuss climate change. However, the Central American Dry Corridor (encompassing parts of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras)[14] from which many of today's asylum seekers and "irregular migrants" originate is highly vulnerable to climate impacts.[15] In 2020 alone, the region "experienced more than one and a half million new displacements driven by

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disasters"[16] such as hurricanes and landslides, with roughly the same number of people again facing urgent food insecurity as a result of prolonged drought and crop failure.[17] It is well documented that these impacts have led to increased cross-border migration; for example, an internal report by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency found that "the overwhelming factor behind the recent record migration from Guatemala was a crop shortage that left citizens impoverished and starving"[18] after a record five-year drought. Furthermore, the literature on climate justice stresses that vulnerability to climate change is inextricable from and consistently compounds the historical harms of colonialism and imperialism to which Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez refers[19] (in some instances even rendering her fire metaphor tragically literal). Given the outsized contribution of the United States to global heating, attention to the climate-driven dimension of migration should considerably strengthen her basic point.

Below, I expand on the idea that we cannot set someone's house on fire and then punish them for fleeing, by exploring the ethics of climate-related displacement and migration from the Dry Corridor to the United States. While the conventional view assumes that such state-sponsored "arson" is relatively rare, I argue that an investigation into the roots of climate-related migration from this region will show it to be the norm, suggesting the need for a different framing. The basic structure of the argument is as follows: After a few brief notes concerning scope and methodology, I begin by considering how influential proponents of the conventional view such as Michael Walzer, Christopher Wellman, and David Miller attempt to ground states' right to exclude migrants. I then weigh the merits of several climate-centered challenges to this view. Next, I explore how the harms of U.S. policy continue to decisively shape migration from the Dry Corridor to the United States, suggesting more extensive reparative duties toward a greater proportion of these claimants than is ordinarily supposed. After briefly considering and responding to potential objections, I conclude by gesturing toward some of the wider implications of this argument, contending that the character of the injustices involved and the scope and scale of the requisite reparative response raise deeper questions about the adequacy of the conventional view.

Brief Notes on Rhetorical Strategy and Terminology

The argument laid out below is deliberately limited in several respects. First, I do not directly defend the free movement of displaced or dispossessed people on the

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grounds of universal principles, although I am sympathetic to such arguments. Instead, I aim to demonstrate that even if we rhetorically accept the conventional view's tenets, attending to the harms driving actual instances of climate migration will greatly weaken some receiving states' claims to justifiable exclusion. Critics of immigration restriction might worry that this argument concedes too much to the status quo. However, as discussed further below, there are good reasons to begin with this type of contextual approach. More abstract arguments for the rights of climate refugees based on self-determination,[20] common ownership of the Earth,[21] or a human right to a livable locale[22] may be well grounded, but they may also be less compelling for many audiences than an account that foregrounds the relevant harms visited by a particular receiving state upon particular migrants. Furthermore, the normative conclusions we draw about specific cases can also point beyond themselves, even if they are not always fully generalizable.

A second sort of argument that I am not pursuing here—again for reasons discussed further below—concerns the expansion of existing legal frameworks such as the 1951 Refugee Convention or the creation of new legal mechanisms to cover climate refugees.[23] Rather, I aim to make a straightforward normative argument concerning what is owed to any person whose cross-border migration is substantially driven by the harmful impacts of climate change. I use the phrase "climate migrants" to refer to such persons, including but not exclusively referring to those whose indisputably climate-forced movement and inability to return (for instance, residents of inundated island states) make them akin to refugees in the framework of existing international law. I agree with Carol Farbotko that climate migration should be understood as "a complex nexus of economic, social, cultural and political—as well as environmental—factors that contribute to mobility associated with climate change."[24] Indeed, I will argue that the phenomenon of climate migration can only be properly understood in this way, and that it is largely incomprehensible when isolated from its structural and historical context.

Finally, the present discussion pertains only to receiving states' responsibility toward cross-border climate migrants. This, of course, does not obviate responsibilities toward internal migrants. The majority of climate migration is currently internal,[25] and this migration too raises pressing questions, such as who should foot the bill for internal resettlement aid. Nonetheless, the core issue at stake in this article is the legitimacy of national immigration restrictions that aim to bar climate migrants from entry. Given the increasing political salience of this question,[26] I have chosen to focus on it here.

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Characterizing the Conventional View

Despite meaningful disagreements among various liberal nationalist and communitarian defenses of the right to exclude, they share certain core commitments that together can be said to constitute the conventional view.[27] Most centrally, proponents of the conventional view defend a relatively broad right of states to decide who can enter their territories and who will be granted membership to their political communities. Accordingly, they see admission of most migrants and refugees as a matter of humanitarian "mutual aid" or charity rather than of justice. They will often concede that states may have special, stronger obligations toward claimants whose displacement has been caused by a receiving state. However, they necessarily view such cases as exceptional rather than the norm. Let us briefly unpack each of these tenets in turn.

The claim that states have a broad right to include or exclude as they see fit is justified on various grounds. Many justifications lean heavily upon the principles of democratic self-determination and free association; for example, Wellman suggests that the right to exclude requires only "three core premises: 1) Legitimate states are entitled to political self-determination, 2) freedom of association is an integral component of self-determination, and 3) freedom of association entitles one to *not* associate with others."[28] Theorists making this sort of rights-based argument often draw an analogy between nation-states and clubs or other forms of voluntary organizations, which, as Walzer notes, "can regulate admissions but cannot bar withdrawals"[29] (the latter being unacceptably coercive). While the posited right to self-determination is sometimes taken to be sufficient to justify selective exclusion, proponents of border controls may also appeal to various consequentialist reasons for limiting entry or full membership. They posit states' rights or duties to protect themselves against the dangers posed by unregulated immigration—dangers that ostensibly include the possible erosion of cultural cohesion or shared democratic values, threats to public safety or national security, the straining of welfare programs, and the loss of environmental integrity.[30]

On this view, states may have a duty to take the interests of migrants into account and give appropriate reasons for exclusion, but they are not generally obligated to admit those who come or to extend citizenship and full privileges of membership to those who are admitted. If no comprehensive universal right to free movement is recognized, and if states have a right to admit or exclude largely as they see fit, then admission of the needy becomes primarily a matter of benevolence rather

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than of justice.[31] Miller, for instance, argues that we cannot completely ignore the interests of migrants in crafting immigration policy, but this "does not in general mean that we have *obligations* toward them, and especially not obligations of justice that in principle third parties can force us to discharge."[32]

Certain qualifications are acknowledged on the conventional view; in accordance with existing norms of international law, states are usually thought to have a shared responsibility toward persons who have no other form of state protection, such as refugees fleeing persecution or war.[33] These responsibilities are generally understood as broadly humanitarian in character.[34] Additionally, although they command considerably less attention in the literature, most defenders of the right to exclude concede that there may be special obligations in cases where a receiving state has helped to cause the displacement. For instance, Walzer suggests that we "may have obligations of the same sort that we have toward fellow nationals" toward "any group whom we have helped turn into refugees."[35] Miller refers to such migrants as "particularity claimants"[36] because particular states may owe them admission due to past wrongs, and argues that in such cases admission to a state that contributed to a particularity claimant's displacement may be understood as "a form of reparation."[37]

However, although they acknowledge that some states may owe some groups entry and status as reparation for harm, advocates of the right to exclude generally regard such cases as exceptions to the rule of discretionary exclusion. Indeed, one could argue that they *must* understand such cases as exceptional in order to maintain the conventional view, lest the exception become the rule and upend the entire framework.

Climate-Centered Challenges to the Conventional View

In light of growing concern about climate-related displacement and migration, a number of political theorists and ethicists have argued that climate migrants should be excepted from discretionary exclusion. Nuances and partial overlap notwithstanding, these arguments generally fall into two categories: first, those making universal humanitarian claims for appropriate compensation to the displaced; and second, those making reparative claims concerning what specific states owe to the specific claimants whom they have harmed.

Several thinkers have made influential arguments for the expansion of the right to asylum or resettlement based on the universal rights of those displaced by

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climate change and the humanitarian duties of all states toward them. For instance, Clare Heyward and Jörgen Ödalen argue that residents of small island states like Tuvalu and the Maldives, who stand to lose not only their homes and livelihoods but "their membership of a self-governing political community," should have a globally accepted right to settle in any state they choose.[38] Robyn Eckersley makes a similar case for states' common but differentiated humanitarian responsibility to accept climate refugees.[39] Cara Nine goes slightly further, arguing that island nations permanently displaced by sea-level rise should be granted new sovereign territory, which would be provided by any existing states with territory to spare. These accounts largely set aside the question of specific causal responsibility for climate displacement, arguing instead for states' shared responsibility (sometimes modulated by their differential ability) to compensate the dispossessed for their loss of political self-determination—though Nine parenthetically notes that "if we can establish that certain groups are to blame for the plight of the Tuvaluans, then the Tuvaluans will have additional grounds for claiming appropriate compensation, including possibly territorial rights, from the guilty parties."[40]

Other theorists focus more centrally on such reparative claims, contending that the presumption of displacement without blame wrongly lets polluting states off the hook by collectivizing responsibility. Sujatha Byravan and Sudhir Chella Rajan, for example, argue that those permanently displaced by sea-level rise (whom they deem "climate exiles") should be granted immigration benefits "on the basis of the host countries' historical greenhouse gas emissions."[41] Rebecca Buxton agrees that permanent climate-related displacement resulting from "total territory loss" is a wrong requiring specific reparation by polluting states, but argues that reparations ideally ought to take the form of new territory for displaced groups rather than immigration rights alone (essentially proffering a reparative version of Nine's view).[42]

Such reparative arguments represent an important challenge to liberal nationalists like Miller who tend to minimize receiving states' causal or outcome responsibility for displacement. For example, in the conclusion of *Strangers in Our Midst*, Miller briefly acknowledges the worry that climate migration could challenge the conventional view. Although a "remote possibility," he says,

> we can imagine a future in which the effects of global warming and resource depletion make large parts of the Earth's surface uninhabitable, and then the searching question is whether the societies that have escaped relatively unscathed would have an obligation to admit refugees in numbers that would transform their own cultures and political institutions. . . . The correct answer is that the obligation to admit would in these

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> circumstances be humanitarian in nature, not something that justice demands, which also implies that it would be a matter for the citizens of the receiving society to decide upon—they could not be forced to comply, either by the refugees themselves or by third parties.[43]

To remain compatible with both his generally restrictive position on immigration *and* his acknowledgment of states' special duties toward particularity claimants, Miller's thought experiment necessarily marginalizes the causal responsibility of those receiving societies for mass climate displacement. Reminders of that responsibility challenge the conventional view—not only in Miller's quasi-hypothetical future but also in the perilous present that climate migrants already face. The power of Ocasio-Cortez's appeal to the historical harms underlying northward migration from Central America must be understood in this real-world political context.

Limits of the Normative Literature on Climate Migration

While it demonstrates the importance of acknowledging reparative duties, the example of migration from Central America to the United States also demonstrates several important limits of the extant literature concerning reparative justice for climate migrants.

Humanitarian and reparative accounts alike have tended to focus on persons or groups who have been indisputably and irreversibly displaced by climate impacts alone. In practice, this means limiting the discussion to displacement from small island states and analogous cases of near-total inundation, excluding migrants like those from the Dry Corridor. It is understandable that many normative theories of climate migration privilege cases that effectively isolate the role of climate change in displacement. However, these clear-cut instances represent a relatively small subset of the overall body of cases of current and projected future climate-related displacement and migration; the empirical literature suggests that most climate migration does and will occur in contexts where the state is not existentially threatened by sea-level rise[44] and where the relationship between climate impacts and migration outcomes is modulated by a variety of nonclimatic factors.

The complexity that these cases introduce might seem to make our task as normative theorists more difficult and leave our arguments more vulnerable to critique. Miller, for instance, charges those who theorize responsibility for climate

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harms in the context of global inequality with "trying to advance a wider egalitarian agenda under the guise of a mechanism for tackling global warming."[45] Nonetheless, we cannot bracket these cases without unreasonably restricting the scope of the argument and disqualifying the large bulk of climate migrants from appropriate redress. As Jamie Draper has recently argued, theorists of climate migration will instead have to reject "untenable monocausal assumptions about the relationship between climate change and displacement"[46] and argue for a more realistically complex view if they wish to properly account for this larger and more broadly representative set of cases.

Philosophers tend to be uncomfortable with such messy complexity, but social scientists widely accept that even apparently nonanthropogenic disasters are never purely "natural."[47] Take, for instance, the 2010 earthquake near Port-au-Prince, Haiti, which killed tens or hundreds of thousands of Haitians[48] and displaced as many as 1.5 million more.[49] By contrast, when an earthquake of similar magnitude struck the San Francisco Bay area in 1989, it killed sixty-three people.[50] We cannot account for the discrepancy if we look only at the force of the earthquakes' shocks. Nor can we account for most climate migration based only on changes in temperature, precipitation, or sea level; it is impossible to get a conceptual grasp on the phenomenon without considering the real-world contexts within which such migration takes place.[51]

In addition to excluding much climate-related migration from consideration, the reluctance of normative theorists to grapple with these real-world complexities prevents them from effectively challenging the idealized image of the international order that structures and constrains the conversation. As Sarah Fine observes, "The contemporary philosophical debate [concerning immigration] is conducted in relatively sanitized discourse" that improperly brackets highly relevant features of the real world.[52] For example, Fine points out that Miller's defense of border controls in an ideal nonracist world is illegitimately applied to the actual world of thoroughly racialized immigration policies.[53] More generally, she argues that if we are starting from "the world as it is," as Miller claims to do,

> then we are starting from a world in which existing territorial borders and population distributions have come about in a variety of complex ways, many of which have included extensive injustices, such as those involved in colonialism, slave trading, wars of aggression, ethnic cleansing and land seizures. The list is long. But Miller's animating idea of benign, discrete national communities stretching into the past and future allows him to brush over those kinds of facts about the world.[54]

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Ernesto Rosen Velásquez shows that similar methodological concerns apply to the restrictionist arguments of Christopher Wellman and Stephen Macedo.[55]

The normative theories of climate migration discussed in the previous section challenge aspects of the conventional view by emphasizing polluting states' responsibilities toward climate migrants, but they generally do not call these broader idealizing assumptions into question. This tendency, too, is understandable, given the complexity of proving the contemporary relevance of historical harms like colonialism or the reality of systemic neocolonial exploitation when attempting to develop a general theory of migration justice.[56] An interlocutor can simply counter, as Miller does to Thomas Pogge when discussing global poverty, that linking historical injustices to present-day conditions "would require taking specific cases and showing the causal mechanisms at work, rather than relying on broad brush assertions."[57]

However understandable it may be, the reluctance to take up this challenge has problematic consequences. For instance, most extant accounts attribute causal or outcome responsibility for climate change solely based on states' greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions,[58] without considering their role in advancing or impeding global climate policy or the various other ways in which they have contributed unequally to the climate crisis. As I have argued elsewhere, a focus on emissions in the absence of historical and structural context leads philosophers to produce "myopic treatments of responsibility for climate change,"[59] thereby ceding crucial ground to partisans of the conventional view.

In general, isolating climate migration from its broader sociopolitical context and sanitizing the dynamics of that context through theoretical abstraction allow proponents of the conventional view to minimize claims of justice and narrow the pool of particularity claimants. A closer examination of real-world cases of climate migration can help to bring these issues into clearer focus, underlining the need for a more integrative and less idealized approach to reparative justice for climate migrants.

A Dry Corridor Drenched in Blood

I have suggested that a more realistic account of receiving states' responsibilities toward climate migrants would need to look at the specificities and complex histories of particular cases, and that doing so may disrupt the dominant debates about migration in various ways. Miller may argue that we need to examine

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specific cases "rather than relying on broad brush assertions," but he says this only to dismiss the idea that present-day harms are often the result of historical injustices and structural imperatives and that this should be reflected in normative theory; he does not actually examine specific cases and the causal mechanisms at work or explore their connections with climate change and migration. Once we descend from the heights of philosophical abstraction and examine the deep entwinement of imperial history and climate vulnerability in particular instances, the conventional view's assumptions about the exceptional character of particularity claims may become harder to justify.

To see why, let us briefly consider the case of contemporary climate migrants attempting to reach the United States from the Dry Corridor. In considering the case of these migrants, the question is: To what extent does the United States, as a receiving state, bear responsibility for causing climate migration from this region, thereby creating a body of particularity claimants toward whom it would have more stringent obligations of justice according to the conventional view? Below, I answer this question in two parts, beginning with a partial analysis of responsibility for climate change and then turning to an abridged integrationist account of social, political, and economic vulnerability to climate impacts.

In weighing U.S. responsibility for climate change, the most obvious factor—and the one on which most reparative accounts exclusively focus—is GHG emissions. This is reasonably straightforward to quantify; while home to a bit over 4 percent of the global population, the United States has emitted approximately a quarter of all historical anthropogenic GHG emissions.[60] By contrast, El Salvador and Nicaragua have each contributed just .01 percent of historical GHG emissions; Honduras is responsible for .02 percent, and Guatemala .03 percent.[61] This causal disparity is not merely historical; per capita emissions in the United States today are still roughly fifteen times higher than in any of these Central American countries.[62]

However, emissions and consumption are only the most visible part of the proverbial iceberg. In determining the full causal responsibility of the United States for climate change, we would have to consider numerous other factors. We would need, for instance, to examine the political role of the United States in undermining, delaying, and watering down attempts to address climate change at the international level.[63] We would also need to consider that even as Democratic presidents pledged meaningful climate action, the United States has dramatically expanded its own exploitation of fossil fuels[64] and increased financing for international fossil fuel

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production through the Export–Import Bank.[65] Finally, in addition to the direct role of the U.S. government in stymieing climate action, we would also want to account for the role played by U.S.-based multinationals such as ExxonMobil and Koch Industries, which are heavily subsidized by U.S. taxpayers and have spent billions of dollars[66] to successfully thwart climate action.[67]

This close relationship between the U.S. state apparatus and U.S.-based segments of fossil fuel capital (recently exemplified in striking fashion by former Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson's appointment as secretary of state in the Trump administration) also raises the broader question of the role of the United States in expanding the reach and enforcing the norms of global capitalism, which is increasingly recognized as a central driver of climate change and environmental destruction more generally. If, as a number of contemporary critical theorists argue, the United States as global hegemon has helped to impose an unsustainable and carbon-intensive model of production, consumption, and governance upon the world—with capitalist "carbon democracy" and its "imperial mode of living" in the North premised upon extractivism and superexploitation in the South[68]—this, too, would be relevant to our evaluation of causal responsibility for climate forcings of migration.

With respect to causal responsibility for the current state of the climate, the role of the United States is already looking quite substantial. However, we still have an incomplete picture of causal responsibility for climate migration from the Dry Corridor because we cannot neatly separate direct climatic drivers from the broader social conditions that create displacement and motivate climate migration. The White House's own 2021 report on climate change and migration acknowledges that political and economic context largely determines whether people ultimately migrate in response to climate impacts.[69] An appropriate normative account of Central American climate migration must likewise recognize that while climate change is ultimately pushing people in the Dry Corridor to migrate, this motivation is inextricable from the precarity of their daily existence and the lack of safe and viable alternatives to cross-border migration.

Philosophers such as Miller and Wellman explicitly assume that such precarity—constituted by a mix of poverty, lack of government infrastructure, incapacity of disaster response adaptation measures, preponderance of violence and conflict, and so on—is generally the responsibility of the sending countries themselves.[70] But a closer examination of actual cases may often show otherwise.

The assumption that Central American climate vulnerability, poverty, and instability are due to poor self-governance is a familiar one.[71] As Juan Gonzalez

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points out, it echoes the common pretexts given for U.S. interventions over the last century, where U.S. officials and media "told people back home the Latin Americans were incapable of responsible government," while "critical details of how the dictators rose to power and terrorized their people with Washington's help, or how their regimes provided a 'friendly' business climate for North American firms, remained hidden deep in diplomatic correspondences."[72] Gonzalez highlights this legacy of imperialism as a central driver of northward migration, which he characterizes as "the unintended harvest of the U.S. empire."[73] Thus, in order to develop a more realistic picture of the responsibility of the United States for climate migration from the Dry Corridor, one must also take into account the relevant history of U.S. foreign policy in Central America.

The list of U.S. interventions in the region is long;[74] here, I can only briefly gesture toward a few of the relevant harms over the last century. These include U.S. invasions and occupations of all four Dry Corridor countries (and many others) during the early and mid-twentieth century, securing the rule of leaders friendly to U.S. corporate and financial interests. U.S.-backed strongmen like Jorge Ubico Castañeda in Guatemala, Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in El Salvador, Tiburcio Carías Andino in Honduras, and the Somoza family in Nicaragua crushed dissent, assassinated progressive rivals, and undermined attempts at national economic development while massively enriching themselves and their U.S. clients. Gonzalez points out that although these names are barely known in the United States, "to their countrymen, they represent lost decades so filled with horror and darkness that some nations are only now recovering."[75]

As the twentieth century progressed, U.S. strategy shifted somewhat; there were still military invasions and occupations where necessary, but more discreet interventions were preferred when possible.[76] Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the CIA and its affiliates helped to overthrow or assassinate democratically elected presidents and revolutionary leaders throughout the Dry Corridor. In this period, the United States armed and funded numerous military juntas and installed corrupt right-wing dictators friendly to U.S. corporations such as the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita); meanwhile, death squads trained at the U.S.-run School of the Americas and armed and funded by the United States suppressed resistance, butchering and terrorizing hundreds of thousands of Salvadorians, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, and Hondurans.[77] This situation, of course, caused a large northward exodus and created lasting destabilization and danger.

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Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the United States has shifted toward "soft power" in the region;[78] however, it has hardly ceased interfering in Central American politics. In 2009, for example, the United States tacitly supported a military coup against Honduras's democratically elected president Manuel Zelaya,[79] conspiring through back channels to prevent his return to office and refusing to cut off aid to the junta.[80] As Belén Fernández shows, this coup "spawned a maelstrom of violence that terrorized ordinary Hondurans and forced caravans of migrants to flee the country."[81] Since that coup, hundreds of labor and environmental activists have been murdered, including the well-known land defender Berta Cáceres (whose killers included two graduates of the infamous School of the Americas, subsequently renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation).[82] It is no coincidence that Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala top Global Witness's rankings of murdered environmental activists per capita.[83]

It is important to note that throughout this history, violent statecraft has gone hand in hand with exploitative and coercive economic and environmental policy. In the early twentieth century, U.S. invasions allowed the United States to reshape economic life in the region, facilitating massive land expropriation and the subsequent transformation of much of that land into monocropped plantations[84] (a transformation that still has tremendous bearing upon contemporary climate vulnerability).[85] This symbiosis of overt and structural violence continued in the neoliberal era; it is often rather difficult to pass structural adjustment policies and austerity packages democratically, which is why they generally had to be imposed by force and terror throughout Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century.[86] But even when such overt coercion is absent, economic policies pushing privatization, export processing zones,[87] and free trade agreements exploit the structural imbalances of the global economy to benefit the United States and some local elites at the expense of everyday people and the environment in Central America.[88]

Philosophers concerned with the ethics of immigration generally downplay the coercive character of these dynamics when debating which historical wrongs might be appropriately redressed through entry and status.[89] But as James Souter argues, we are owed a convincing argument for why "the effects of 'destabilizing structural adjustment programs'"[90] should not be categorized as a wrong of this kind. When one examines the history of the Dry Corridor, one finds that the imposition of such policies by the United States (as well as by institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, over which the United States

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holds great influence) has undermined democratic control over fundamental aspects of social policy and slashed social safety nets,[91] facilitated large-scale land grabbing, and fed the rapid acceleration of resource extraction and environmental degradation[92]—all of which have helped to make everyday life in the Dry Corridor precarious and sensitive to climate impacts.[93]

This is only a partial and extremely abbreviated account of the relevant dynamics in the region.[94] However, I hope that what has been said is sufficiently suggestive. My aim in laying out these various layers of harm is not to argue that the United States is solely responsible for producing climate migration in the Dry Corridor; there is certainly plenty of blame to go around,[95] and an exclusive focus on imperial harm can cover over local complexity and erase agency (including both that of resistance movements and that of local elites who perpetuate the racial dynamics of colonialism and oppress Indigenous peoples).[96]

Given the great philosophical and empirical complexities involved, it is not clear exactly what portion of the responsibility for these migrants' plight the United States owns; indeed, I will argue below that such calculations are ultimately impossible to make, suggesting the need for an alternative approach. Regardless, it should be clear that we cannot simply bracket the question, as many philosophers of migration do. It should further be clear that it does not make sense to solely blame the inhabitants of the Dry Corridor and their "ineffective" governments for the poverty, violence, and environmental degradation that have upended their lives. To do so, we would have to ignore the well-documented facts that the United States is the largest historical contributor to climate change and that these corrupt local leaders, murderous death squads, and opportunistic corporate actors have been consistently funded, trained, armed, and empowered by the United States for over a century, resulting in higher vulnerability to climate harms and fewer viable alternatives to cross-border migration. In this context it is clear that, as Seyla Benhabib argues, "Blaming the stranger is a way of reducing complexity and avoiding responsibility."[97]

The analysis offered above may not be generalizable to every sending or receiving country. But it does demonstrate that when we examine the realities of such migration, they may differ radically from the idealized picture painted by mainstream migration theory; at least in the case of the Dry Corridor, filling in the relevant context makes it extremely difficult to see the United States as a detached observer of its climate migrants' misfortune. Because the United States has played a key role in causing the immiseration and displacement of these migrants, it

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seems that many are owed redress even according to the stated standards of the conventional view; as particularity claimants, many migrants would be owed admission and status. We might think that they deserve considerably more than that—Naomi Klein suggests that, beyond asylum and status, climate migrants are "owed kindness, compensation, and heartfelt apology"[98] from those who have helped to render their homes uninhabitable.

Objections

While I think the argument I have laid out is reasonably straightforward, there are several potential objections to consider.

One possible reply is that even if a state's past actions have contributed to climate migrants' displacement, it is unfair to hold the present citizens of that state liable. The unfairness might be especially acute where the historical harms resulted from excusable ignorance, as is sometimes argued of pre-1990 GHG emissions.[99] There would indeed be cause for concern if I treated such emissions as a crime ex post facto and decreed that the descendants of emitters should be punished.[100] But I am not arguing for imposed immigration as retribution for past emissions; as Souter points out, even if migrants were not "highly beneficial to their states of asylum in economic, social and cultural terms . . . it would nevertheless be morally dubious to present the presence of human beings on one's territory as a form of punishment."[101] Rather, climate migrants are persons to whom certain states and their citizens owe a debt, and this debt is incurred not only by those who directly and maliciously initiate harm but by all who benefit from and participate in ongoing structural injustice. As I explain below, the reparative program that stems from such injustice is not vulnerable to this objection of unfairness.

However, it might still be objected that even if a state's causal responsibility is acknowledged, its reparative duties toward climate migrants need not include granting entry and status. Wellman, for instance, asks why we would presume "that compensation must be paid in the currency of open borders" rather than, say, financial transfers.[102] It is worth taking this question seriously. I would not wish to suggest that granting entry and status to migrants is the only—or even the most efficient or important—form of reparation for the harms of climate change and imperial destabilization. There are numerous other obligations that responsible nations or their citizens may have toward those affected by climate change (such as to agitate for meaningful mitigation, massive financial and

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technological transfers, and the cessation of neocolonial resource exploitation),[103] some of which may be more effective at redressing its wrongs in some instances. Indeed, it is plausible that addressing the injustices of climate change through the liberalization of immigration alone could further harm sending countries and those without the means or mobility to migrate.[104]

Nonetheless, given that some significant degree of climate-related displacement is now unavoidable, we are left with the question of what is owed to those who have been or will be uprooted by climate-related harms. Those harms may be "sufficiently severe to render proportionality unattainable"[105] when aiming for appropriate reparation—the status quo ante cannot be restored for those whose land and climate have been irreversibly degraded to the extent that their former ways of life have become impossible. Practically, in many such cases, entry and status will be the next best things to full restitution.

Further, even if more "efficient" reparative options are available in some instances, there is still something ethically perverse in a state's exclusion of migrants whose homes it has helped to destroy. Concerns about efficiency, as Souter notes, are often raised "without identifying what good is to be maximized, and in whose interests";[106] in the context of reparation for wrongful displacement, such appeals to efficiency are germane only where admittance of some migrants would substantially and unavoidably undermine other claimants' prospects for meaningful reparation. In my view, then, the most intuitive position to adopt is that everything possible should be done to end ongoing harms and to help people adapt to locked-in warming, *and* those compelled to migrate to the relative safety of a causally responsible receiving country must be granted entry and status.[107]

From another perspective, some might object that this argument does not go *far enough*, and that many climate migrants are owed more than entry and status. For example, Buxton suggests that displaced communities should be granted new sovereign territory, which would "reestablish a sense of place for future generations" that immigration rights alone cannot do, and thus come closer to full reparation.[108] Others point out that full reparation also requires an explicit acknowledgment of and apology for the harm done. Such apologies can be empty gestures on their own, but when issued alongside full immigration rights they become more meaningful; in such a context, as Souter argues, the welcoming of migrants would function as "an inward-looking expression of contrition and apology, thereby acting as a form of satisfaction."[109] Finally, Olúfémi O. Táíwò argues more radically that backward-looking views of reparation that primarily focus

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on the present effects of specific past harms are both unworkable and unnecessary, and that the appropriate response to structural injustices is a larger, forward-looking project of social transformation. Táíwò suggests that "climate justice and reparations are the same project," the task of which is "quite literally, to remake the world" built by a global racial empire along more just lines.[110]

I largely agree with these objections. In this situation, immigration rights are indeed "primarily remedial rather than fully reparatory,"[111] and cannot undo the loss of homes, communities, and ways of life. Likewise, true climate justice cannot be realized without abolishing the racialized structures of domination and exploitation that have fueled climate change and generated the dramatically unequal distribution of its harms. However, even if migration cannot substitute for the longer-term project of structural transformation, in the meantime it remains a vitally important lifeline for individual climate migrants.[112] Further, I believe my comparatively modest reparative argument is compatible with—and perhaps even a necessary component of—the more ambitious goals of full reparation and radical social transformation. While that larger project of constructive reparation is indeed forward looking, the proper recognition of past harms is indispensable for motivating it, and the fair treatment of climate migrants will be integral to any "just transition" worthy of the name.[113]

Understanding my argument as facilitating the recognition of harm in the service of broader structural transformation may help to address a second version of the insufficiency objection. As noted at the start, my focus on specific contextual harms requires one to investigate the relevant historical facts and structural dynamics of particular cases, and as such the conclusions drawn are not immediately and fully generalizable. My argument may therefore appear both weaker and more difficult to make successfully than more immediately universalist appeals for border abolition. I will conclude by addressing this last objection more fully.

Conclusion

Rather than making broader arguments for open borders or border abolition based on human rights or universal principles in response to climate migration, I have pursued here a more modest line of critique, expanding upon the idea that even according to the conventional view you cannot set someone's house on fire and then blame them for fleeing. This intervention, as I have stressed, is intentionally bounded in scope; it requires us to consider who has set which

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particular houses on fire and then jailed or desiccated or drowned those fleeing the flames.

However, even when we confine our investigation to a particular context in this way, the scale of the arson we discover may raise broader questions about the conventional view; Benhabib suggests that such non-ideal explorations of actual examples may ultimately have "significant implications for…seminal question[s] in ideal democratic theory" such as "how to define and justify the boundaries of the demos."[114] For example, while the liberal nationalist argument for border restriction requires that "nation-states must be represented as formally equal and sovereign,"[115] it should be clear from the account above that states in the Dry Corridor still cannot be said to have an equal, or even a minimally adequate, degree of sovereignty; decisions governing the most crucial aspects of their citizens' life prospects, including whether much of their territory will be habitable by human beings in the coming decades, are too consistently made elsewhere. And if meaningful democratic self-determination—the basic principle that allegedly grounds a states' right to exclude—is not generalizable in a warming world structured by border imperialism, then this highlights the need to further interrogate this fundamental ideological pillar of the modern nation-state form.

Furthermore, although the details are specific and important, the case I have discussed here is not unique in its general outlines; analogous stories can be told for many—perhaps most—other instances of climate migration. Migrants and advocates have already been telling these stories; if enough normative theorists care to listen and join them, the idealizing assumptions of the conventional view will become increasingly harder to justify, and the burden of justification may begin to shift. Rather than relying on broad brush assertions, we might then say, defenders of the right to exclude will have to demonstrate the actual instances in which such exclusion is warranted—where the processes are just, the institutions are legitimate, and the excluded are not wronged. Such cases, one suspects, may turn out to be the exception.

NOTES

[1] Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), p. 3.
[2] Joseph H. Carens, *The Ethics of Immigration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 10.
[3] Anna Stilz argues that "most political theorists have . . . adopted an *institutionally conservative* approach" to the justification of the territorial state system. Anna Stilz, *Territorial Sovereignty: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 8.
[4] E. Tendayi Achiume, "Migration as Decolonization," *Stanford Law Review* 71, no. 6 (June 2019), pp. 1509–74, at p. 1515.

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[5] See, for example, Phillip Cole, "Open Borders: An Ethical Defense," pt. 2 in Christopher Heath Wellman and Phillip Cole, eds., *Debating the Ethics of Immigration: Is There a Right to Exclude?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 159–313; Carens, *Ethics of Immigration*; and Alex Sager, *Against Borders: Why the World Needs Free Movement of People* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2020).

[6] This is a key aspect of a more general challenge that climate change poses for traditional conceptions of political sovereignty and citizenship. See, for example, Andrew Dobson, *Citizenship and the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Simon Caney, "Cosmopolitan Justice, Responsibility, and Global Climate Change," *Leiden Journal of International Law* 18, no. 4 (December 2005), pp. 747–75; and Johanna Oksala, "Political Philosophy in the Era of Climate Change: Between Eco-Cosmopolitanism and the Green State," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 37, no. 1 (January 2016), pp. 51–70.

[7] Kyle Whyte, Jared L. Talley, and Julia D. Gibson point out that instead of focusing only on allegedly unprecedented phenomena, we need to unravel the "layers of colonial injustice" that have produced it. (See Kyle Whyte, Jared L. Talley, and Julia D. Gibson, "Indigenous Mobility Traditions, Colonialism, and the Anthropocene," *Mobilities* 14, no. 3 [2019], pp. 319–35). While it is easy to overstate the novelty of the present situation by overlooking existing injustices, in the context of displacement and migration the acceleration of climate change has clearly exacerbated them and expanded their scale.

[8] Roman Hoffman, Anna Dimitrova, Raya Muttarak, Jesus Crespo Cuaresma, and Jonas Peisker, "A Meta-Analysis of Country-Level Studies on Environmental Change and Migration," *Nature Climate Change* 10 (October 2020), pp. 904–12.

[9] Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2021: Internal Displacement in a Changing Climate* (Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2021), www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2021/.

[10] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*, ed. Hans-Otto Pörtner, Debra C. Roberts, Melinda M. B. Tignor, Elvira Poloczanska, Katja Mintenbeck, Andrés Alegría, Marlies Craig, et al. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2022), www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/.

[11] Jamie Draper and Catriona McKinnon correctly point out that "despite a burgeoning literature considering the ethical implications of climate change more broadly, and the ethics of migration, the nexus between the two issues has not been given enough attention by political theorists." Jamie Draper and Catriona McKinnon, "The Ethics of Climate-Induced Community Displacement and Resettlement," *WIREs Climate Change* 9, no. 3 (April 16, 2018), p. e519.

[12] The second edition of Byron Williston's *The Ethics of Climate Change: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2024), for example, includes a section on refugee law as part of a new chapter on the philosophy of law and climate change. The issue of migration is notably absent, however, from most similar texts.

[13] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, quoted in Darragh Roche, "AOC Slams U.S. Stance on Migrants, Says Kamala Harris Comments 'Disappointing,'" *Newsweek*, last updated June 8, 2021, www.newsweek.com/aoc-slams-us-stance-migrants-says-kamala-harris-comments-disappointing-1598489.

[14] Grazia Pacillo, Harold Achicanoy, Julian Ramirez-Villegas, Alessandro Craparo, Ashleigh Basel, Victor Villa, Theresa Liebig, et al., *Is Climate Change a "Risk Multiplier" in the Central American Dry Corridor?*, (Montpellier, France: CGIAR, 2022), www.wfp.org/publications/climate-risk-multiplier-central-american-dry-corridor.

[15] Kirk Semple, "Central American Farmers Head to the U.S., Fleeing Climate Change," *New York Times*, April 13, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/04/13/world/americas/coffee-climate-change-migration.html.

[16] "Central America," Migration Data Portal, October 7, 2021.

[17] Jeff Masters, "Fifth Straight Year of Central American Drought Helping Drive Migration," *Scientific American* blog network, December 23, 2019, blogs.scientificamerican.com/eye-of-the-storm/fifth-straight-year-of-central-american-drought-helping-drive-migration/.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Among many examples, see Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2012) and Olúfémi O. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[20] Cara Nine, "Ecological Refugees, States Borders, and the Lockean Proviso," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (2010), pp. 359–75.

[21] Mathias Risse, "The Right to Relocation: Disappearing Island Nations and Common Ownership of the Earth," *Ethics & International Affairs* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2009), pp. 281–300.

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[22] Simona Capisani, "Livability and a Framework for Climate Mobilities Justice," *Philosophy and Public Issues* 11, no. 1 (2021), pp. 217–62.

[23] This strategy might be viable in some instances, but there are reasons to be wary. There are numerous loopholes within the existing legal framework for refugees and an increasing culture of impunity that allow states to avoid their responsibilities (see Nanjala Nyabola, "The End of Asylum: A Pillar of the Liberal Order Is Collapsing—but Does Anyone Care?," *Foreign Affairs*, October 10, 2019, www.foreignaffairs.com/world/end-asylum), and attempts to codify the category of "climate refugee" could easily invite a multiplication of such evasions and exclusions. The head of the Migration, Environment and Climate Division of the UN Migration Agency, for example, notes that "creating a special refugee status for climate change related reasons might unfortunately have the opposite effects of what is sought as a solution: it can lead to the exclusion of categories of people who are in need of protection, especially the poorest migrants who move because of a mix of factors and would not be able to prove the link to climate and environmental factors" (Dina Ionesco, "Let's Talk about Climate Migrants, Not Climate Refugees," United Nations, www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/06/lets-talk-about-climate-migrants-not-climate-refugees/). These worries are echoed by theorists like Jane McAdam (*Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012]) and Phillip Cole ("Climate Change and Global Displacement: Towards an Ethical Response," in Birgit Schippers, ed., *The Routledge Handbook to Rethinking Ethics in International Relations* [New York: Routledge, 2020], pp. 179–94).

[24] Carol Farbotko, "Representation and Misrepresentation of Climate Migrants," in Benoît Mayer and François Crépeau, eds., *Research Handbook on Climate Change, Migration and the Law* (Northampton, Mass: Edward Elgar, 2017), pp. 67–82, at p. 69.

[25] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022*. It is important to note, however, that this is in part due to the coercive character of the present global border regime.

[26] A number of authors have noted that climate migration may fuel ethnonationalist movements, hastening "climate barbarism" or even "ecofascism." See, for example, Naomi Klein, "Against Climate Barbarism: A Conversation with Naomi Klein," interview by Wen Stephenson, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 30, 2019, lareviewofbooks.org/article/against-climate-barbarism-a-conversation-with-naomi-klein.

[27] Achiume correctly points out that even though human rights discourse has an overtly cosmopolitan dimension, "international law as a whole still most faithfully reflects the political theory of liberal nationalists, who defend the sovereign right to exclude as existential, making limited exceptions for the admission and gradual inclusion of political strangers who are otherwise at risk of persecution or extreme human rights violations." Achiume "Migration as Decolonization," p. 1516.

[28] Christopher Heath Wellman, "Freedom of Association and the Right to Exclude," pt. 1 in Wellman and Cole, eds., *Debating the Ethics of Immigration*, pp. 13–156, at p. 13. See also Michael Blake, "Immigration, Jurisdiction, and Exclusion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2013), pp. 103–30.

[29] Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 40.

[30] See, for example, Wellman, "Freedom of Association and the Right to Exclude"; Stephen Macedo, "The Moral Dilemma of U.S. Immigration Policy: Open Borders versus Social Justice?," in Carol M. Swain, ed., *Debating Immigration* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 63–82; and David Miller, *Strangers in Our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[31] Of course, this benevolence is largely hypothetical; in general, as Phillip Cole points out, "Liberal states do not admit immigrants because they believe this is good *for the immigrants*." Rather, existing immigration regimes "largely operate as systems of economic exploitation, with the powerful developed nations taking those they consider economically valuable from the weaker developing nations." Cole, "Open Borders," p. 197.

[32] Miller, *Strangers in Our Midst*, p. 33.

[33] Miller agrees: "Refugees are people toward whom states have more stringent obligations than toward immigrants in general." Miller, *Strangers in Our Midst*, p. 78.

[34] James Souter, *Asylum as Reparation: Refuge and Responsibility for the Harms of Displacement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

[35] Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, p. 49.

[36] Miller, *Strangers in Our Midst*, p. 77.

[37] Ibid., p. 90. See also James Souter, "Towards a Theory of Asylum as Reparation for Past Injustice," *Political Studies* 62, no. 2 (2014), pp. 326–42. However, note that theorists of migration do not universally agree on this point; Wellman, for instance, suggests that any reparative responsibilities states might

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have for such harms "need not be paid in the currency of open borders." Wellman, "Freedom of Association and the Right to Exclude," p. 66.

[38] Clare Heyward and Jörgen Ödalen, "A Free Movement Passport for the Territorially Dispossessed," in Clare Heyward and Dominic Roser, eds., *Climate Justice in a Non-Ideal World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 208–26, at pp. 208–209.

[39] Robyn Eckersley, "The Common but Differentiated Responsibilities of States to Assist and Receive 'Climate Refugees,'" *European Journal of Political Theory* 14, no. 4 (2015), pp. 481–500.

[40] Nine, "Ecological Refugees, States Borders, and the Lockean Proviso," pp. 372.

[41] Sujatha Byravan and Sudhir Chella Rajan, "Providing New Homes for Climate Change Exiles," *Climate Policy* 6, no. 2 (2006), pp. 247–52, at p. 249.

[42] Rebecca Buxton, "Reparative Justice for Climate Refugees," *Philosophy* 94, no. 2 (April 2019), pp. 193–219.

[43] Miller, *Strangers in Our Midst*, p. 163.

[44] Katrina M. Wyman, "Ethical Duties to Climate Migrants," in Mayer and Crépeau, eds., *Research Handbook on Climate Change, Migration and the Law*, pp. 347–75, at p. 374.

[45] David Miller, "Global Justice and Climate Change: How Should Responsibilities Be Distributed?" *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 28 (2009), pp. 119-156, at p. 150.

[46] Jamie Draper, "Climate Change and Displacement: Towards a Pluralist Approach," *European Journal of Political Theory* 23, no. 1 (2024), pp. 44–64, at p. 48.

[47] Neil Smith, "There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster," Social Science Research Council, June 11, 2006, items.ssrc.org/understanding-katrina/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-natural-disaster/.

[48] Estimates of mortality associated with the event vary markedly, ranging from forty-six thousand to over three hundred thousand people killed. As Robert Muggah and Athena Kolbe argue, the truth is likely somewhere in between. See Robert Muggah and Athena Kolbe, "Haiti: Why an Accurate Count of Civilian Deaths Matters," *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2011, www.latimes.com/opinion/la-xpm-2011-jul-12-la-oe-muggah-haiti-count-20110712-story.html.

[49] Juliette Benet, "Behind the Numbers: The Shadow of 2010's Earthquake Still Looms Large in Haiti," Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, January 13, 2020, www.internal-displacement.org/expert-analysis/behind-the-numbers-the-shadow-of-2010s-earthquake-still-looms-large-in-haiti/.

[50] "Earthquake Loma Prieta California 1989," National Institute of Standards and Technologies, last updated January 6, 2017, www.nist.gov/el/earthquake-loma-prieta-california-1989.

[51] In particular, as Daniel Faber and Christina Schlegel argue, "The impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on potential refugees cannot be separated from the social, political, and economic structures of neoliberal capitalism in which people's daily lives are embedded." Daniel Faber and Christina Schlegel, "Give Me Shelter from the Storm: Framing the Climate Refugee Crisis in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28, no. 3 (2017), pp. 1–17, at p. 4.

[52] Sarah Fine, "Immigration and Discrimination," in Sarah Fine and Lea Ypi, eds., *Migration in Political Theory: The Ethics of Movement and Membership* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 125–50, at p. 126.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Sarah Fine, "Migration, Political Philosophy, and the Real World," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20, no. 6 (2017), pp. 719–25, at p. 723.

[55] Ernesto Rosen Velásquez, "States of Violence and the Right to Exclude," *Journal of Poverty* 21, no. 4 (2017), pp. 310–30.

[56] In an article entitled "Towards a Non-Ideal Theory of Climate Migration," Joachim Wündisch briefly suggests that "what makes a territory uninhabitable for a particular group may be the combination of the effects of colonialism and climate change." However, because "the complexities arising from these and similar considerations are vast," he brackets the issue. See Joachim Wündisch, "Towards a Non-Ideal Theory of Climate Migration," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2019), pp. 496–527, at p. 502.

[57] David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 251.

[58] See, for instance, Raphael J. Nawrotzki, "Climate Migration and Moral Responsibility," *Ethics, Policy & Environment* 17, no. 1 (2014), pp. 69–87.

[59] Dan Boscov-Ellen, "A Responsibility to Revolt? Climate Ethics in the Real World," *Environmental Values* 29, no. 2 (2020), pp. 153–74, at p. 157.

[60] Nadja Popovich and Brad Plumer, "Who Has the Most Historical Responsibility for Climate Change?," *New York Times*, November 12, 2021, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/11/12/climate/cop26-emissions-compensation.html.

[61] Hannah Ritchie, "Who Has Contributed Most to Global CO_2 Emissions?," Our World in Data, October 1, 2019, ourworldindata.org/contributed-most-global-co2.

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[62] "Carbon Footprint by Country," World Population Review, worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/carbon-footprint-by-country. In fact, the causal inequalities are greater than these emissions figures indicate; consumption-based data, which accounts for the outsourcing of emissions-intensive activities to the Global South, would show disparities that are starker still. See, for example, Brad Plumer, "A Closer Look at How Rich Countries 'Outsource' Their CO_2 Emissions to Poorer Ones," Vox, April 18, 2017, www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2017/4/18/15331040/emissions-outsourcing-carbon-leakage.

[63] While the United States played a central role in passing the Paris Agreement, the treaty's nonbinding and voluntary, "potluck-style" approach was primarily due to U.S. objections to principled distributions of responsibility (over which, for example, the United States refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol). The United States has also fought to avoid liability for loss and damage, and has consistently fallen far short of its commitments toward international climate finance—promises used to bring poor countries on board with the Paris Agreement. See, for instance, Chloé Farand, "'Betrayal': US Approves Just $1bn Climate Finance for Developing Countries in 2022," Climate Home News, November 3, 2022, www.climatechangenews.com/2022/03/11/betrayal-us-approves-just-1bn-climate-finance-for-developing-countries-in-2022.

[64] Matt Egan, "America's biggest Oil Boom Came under Obama," CNN, July 21, 2016, money.cnn.com/2016/07/21/investing/trump-energy-plan-obama-oil-boom/index.html.

[65] Sonali Prasad, Jason Burke, Michael Slezak, and Oliver Milman, "Obama's Dirty Secret: The Fossil Fuel Projects the US Littered around the World," *Guardian*, December 1, 2016, www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/dec/01/obama-fossil-fuels-us-export-import-bank-energy-projects.

[66] Diego Rojas, "The Climate Denial Machine: How the Fossil Fuel Industry Blocks Climate Action," Climate Reality Project, September 5, 2019, www.climaterealityproject.org/blog/climate-denial-machine-how-fossil-fuel-industry-blocks-climate-action.

[67] They did this even as their own internal science accurately predicted exactly where these actions would lead. See Emily Holden, "Exxon Sowed Doubt about Climate Crisis, House Democrats Hear in Testimony," *Guardian*, October 23, 2019, www.theguardian.com/business/2019/oct/23/exxon-climate-crisis-house-democrats-hearing.

[68] See, for instance, Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso Books, 2011); Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (New York: Verso Books, 2021); and Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What We Can Do about It* (New York: Verso Books, 2022).

[69] White House, *Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration* (Washington, D.C.: White House, October 2021), www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf.

[70] Such accounts include that of Gracie Mae Bradley and Luke De Noronha, who argue, "The 'push factors' driving . . . decisions to migrate hang in the background: a kind of miasma of war, persecution and ecological collapse divorced from the actions and histories of countries in the global North." Gracie Mae Bradley and Luke De Noronha, *Against Borders: The Case for Abolition* (Paris: Shakespeare and Company, 2022), p. 3.

[71] Miller, for instance, ponders why "people have been so eager to throw off colonial rule . . . when there was little evidence that the quality of their governance would actually improve as a result" (Miller, *Strangers in Our Midst*, p. 69). His answer is that they value self-determination; it is better to be "governed by somebody who shares your aims and values even if they are not particularly effective at implementing them" (ibid.).

[72] Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 59. Ashley Dawson points out that such narratives help to generate "a myth of the ethnically pure nation besieged by people fleeing infernal zones of social breakdown. This conveniently elides the role of the US and Europe in the violent invasions, clandestine wars, debt-producing instability, and other colonial and postcolonial atrocities that have destabilized the areas from which most migrants/refugees flee." Ashley Dawson, *Environmentalism from Below: How Global People's Movements Are Leading the Fight for Our Planet* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2024), p. 200.

[73] Ibid., p. XVII.

[74] See, for instance, Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997); and Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Making of an Imperial Republic* (New York: Picador Books, 2007).

[75] Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire*, p. XVII.

[76] See Grandin, *Empire's Workshop*.

[77] The result, as Gonzalez notes, was that "by the early 1980s, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua were all engulfed in wars for which our own [U.S.] government bore much responsibility. In El Salvador

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alone, human rights groups estimated that five hundred people a month were being massacred by the death squads." See Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire*, p. 138.

[78] U.S. foreign policy in the region increasingly relies upon organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the U.S. Agency for International Development to support U.S.-friendly politicians and undermine progressive governments. As former acting president and director of the research study that led to the creation of NED, Allen Weinstein, acknowledges, "A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA" (Allen Weinstein, quoted in "The National Endowment for Democracy Responds to Our Burma Nuclear Story—and Our Response," ProPublica, November 24, 2010, www.propublica.org/article/the-national-endowment-for-democracy-responds-to-our-burma-nuclear-story). Furthermore, U.S. aid in the form of funding, arms, and training for the drug war, which from its inception has facilitated the racialized criminalization of Latinos and Black Americans (see Kojo Koram, *The War on Drugs and the Global Colour Line* [London: Pluto, 2019] and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* [New York: New Press, 2020]), has further increased the militarization of policing and exacerbated violence throughout the region, even as U.S. aid money also continues to flow to known narco-traffickers in Honduras and elsewhere (see Antony Loewenstein, "In Honduras, the U.S. War on Drugs Is Empowering Corrupt Elites," *Foreign Policy*, December 11, 2019, foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/11/in-honduras-the-u-s-war-on-drugs-is-empowering-corrupt-elites). A similar exacerbation of local violence results from U.S. "aid" for border patrols and anti-migration measures throughout Central America. As Todd Miller argues, Central America is "a particularly strong example not only of the U.S. creation of border patrols, but also of border imperialism" (Todd Miller, *Empire of Borders: The Expansion of the U.S. Border around the World* [New York: Verso Books, 2019], p. 32). Here, the continuity between the regional history explored above and contemporary U.S-trained border enforcement is especially clear; Miller shows that "twentieth-century ideas about counterinsurgency, especially regarding control of potentially incompliant civilian populations, are basic to the twenty-first-century idea of homeland security" that animates this expansionary border regime (Miller, *Empire of Borders*, p. 32).

[79] Sarah Kinosian, "Crisis of Honduras Democracy Has Roots in US Tacit Support for 2009 Coup," *Guardian*, December 7, 2017, www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/07/crisis-of-honduras-democracy-has-roots-in-us-tacit-support-for-2009-coup.

[80] Alexander Main, "Hillary Clinton's Emails and the Honduras Coup," Center for Economic and Policy Research, September 23, 2015, cepr.net/the-hillary-clinton-emails-and-honduras.

[81] Belén Fernández, "How the US Created Violent Chaos in Honduras," *Jacobin*, August 10, 2019, www.jacobin.com/2019/08/us-honduras-coup-manuel-zelaya-exile-excerpt. For a more complete account, see Belén Fernández, *Exile: Rejecting America and Finding the World* (New York: OR Books, 2019).

[82] Nina Lakhani, *Who Killed Berta Cáceres? Dams, Death Squads, and an Indigenous Defender's Battle for the Planet* (New York: Verso Books, 2020).

[83] "Global Witness Reports 227 Land and Environmental Activists Murdered in a Single Year, the Worst Figure on Record," Global Witness, September 13, 2021, www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/global-witness-reports-227-land-and-environmental-activists-murdered-single-year-worst-figure-record.

[84] See Grandin, *Empire's Workshop*.

[85] See Daniel Faber, *Environment under Fire: Imperialism and the Ecological Crisis in Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993).

[86] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).

[87] See, for instance, Sofi Thanhauser, "Behind the Label: How the US Stitched Up the Honduras Garment Industry," *Guardian*, January 25, 2022, www.theguardian.com/news/2022/jan/25/behind-the-label-how-the-us-stitched-up-the-honduras-garment-industry.

[88] Even today, a Central American garment worker or coffee farmer producing for U.S. consumption earns a miniscule fraction of the final sale price of the commodities he or she produces. As John Smith points out, each item of clothing or cup of coffee "expands the GDP of the country where it is consumed far more than that of the country where it is produced," and indeed often "the tariffs charged by the U.S. government on its apparel imports . . . [exceed] the total wages received by the workers who made the goods." He suggests that "only an economist could think there is nothing wrong about this!" Or, one might add, a philosopher. See John Smith, *Imperialism in the 21st Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation and Capitalism's Final Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016), pp. 12–14.

[89] Wellman, for example, argues that even if migrants have been harmed by policies such as free trade agreements, "it does not necessarily follow that their rights have been violated and/or that they are morally entitled to compensation. If someone opens a restaurant right across the street from mine, and my

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business suffers as a consequence, this competing restaurateur has clearly harmed me, but presumably she has not wronged me, and I assume that she does not owe me any compensation" (Christopher Heath Wellman, "Immigration Restrictions in the Real World," in "Selected Papers from the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division, 2011 Meeting," special issue, *Philosophical Studies* 169, no. 1 [May 2014], pp. 119–22, at p. 119). In order to nullify migrants' potential claims of justice in such cases, philosophers appeal to the apparent consent involved in such agreements, portraying the resultant harms as incidental consequences of mutually consensual relations among equals. See Matthew E. Price, *Rethinking Asylum: History, Purpose, and Limits* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[90] Souter, "Towards a Theory of Asylum as Reparation for Past Injustice," p. 339.

[91] Klein, *Shock Doctrine.*

[92] Faber and Schlegel, "Give Me Shelter from the Storm," pp. 5–7.

[93] For example, Faber and Schlegel note that "in the fragile highlands of El Salvador . . . hundreds of thousands of desperately poor family farmers displaced by the expansion of export coffee estates are attempting to survive in a landscape already irreversibly destroyed by erosion, gully formation, and deforestation," while "capitalist export agriculture and the mining sector" have overexploited the land to the extent that nearly 80 percent of the country "suffers serious soil erosion." Faber and Schlegel, "Give Me Shelter from the Storm," p. 7.

[94] Most notably, I have not had the space to discuss the relationship between U.S. immigration policy and racism. For insight on this topic and its importance for normative accounts of migration, see Fine, "Immigration and Discrimination"; Bradley and Noronha, *Against Borders*; and Reece Jones, *White Borders: The History of Race and Immigration in the United States from Chinese Exclusion to the Border Wall* (Boston: Beacon, 2022).

[95] The history of climate geopolitics has featured several important antagonists, and beyond this, environmental philosophers will be quick to point out that responsibility can be allocated at various partially overlapping but irreducible levels, from individuals to states to global economic structures. See, for example, Dale Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle against Climate Change Failed—and What It Means for Our Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[96] Luis Rubén Díaz Cepeda, "Ethics of Liberation: Listening to Central American Migrants' Response to Forced Migration," in Amy Reed-Sandoval and Luis Rubén Díaz Cepeda, eds., *Latin American Immigration Ethics* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021), pp. 173–97.

[97] Seyla Benhabib, "The End of the 1951 Refugee Convention? Dilemmas of Sovereignty, Territoriality, and Human Rights," *Jus Cogens* 2 (July 2020), pp. 75–100, at p. 91.

[98] Naomi Klein, *On Fire: The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), p. 46.

[99] See, for example, Risse, "The Right to Relocation," and Wündisch, "Towards a Non-Ideal Theory of Climate Migration."

[100] Henry Shue, *The Pivotal Generation: Why We Have a Moral Responsibility to Slow Climate Change Right Now* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2021), pp. 35–57.

[101] Souter, *Asylum as Reparation*, p. 58.

[102] Wellman, "Immigration Restrictions in the Real World," p. 120.

[103] For more on the broader reparative responsibilities entailed by climate change as a product of imperial relations, see Boscov-Ellen, "A Responsibility to Revolt?" and Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*.

[104] For example, there is considerable discussion of the problem of "brain drain" from sending countries (see, especially, Gillian Brock and Michael Blake, *Debating Brain Drain: May Governments Restrict Emigration?* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015]), as well as associated issues such as the creation of care deficits (see Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Love and Gold," in Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, eds., *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Global Economy* [New York: Henry Holt, 2002], pp. 15–30). However, rather than reinforcing arguments against freedom of movement, we can better understand these dynamics as an indictment of the massive international imbalances in wealth and power inherent to the existing world system, one that calls for larger changes to this system than liberalization alone.

[105] Souter, "Towards a Theory of Asylum as Reparation for Past Injustice," p. 333.

[106] Ibid., p. 336.

[107] As Dawson points out, in 2021 the United States spent nearly eleven times more on border enforcement than "on helping countries cope with the carbon emissions it has had such an outsize role in generating" (Dawson, *Environmentalism from Below,* p. 206). A shift away from militarized border policing and detention could, among other benefits, free up substantial funding for further reparative projects.

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[108] Buxton, "Reparative Justice for Climate Refugees," pp. 211–17. In making this claim, Buxton draws upon the same rhetoric of collective self-determination and cultural heritage to which the conventional view appeals in its defense of immigration restriction.
[109] Souter, "Towards a Theory of Asylum as Reparation for Past Injustice," p. 335. Beyond this reparative function, it is also worth noting that such official and open acknowledgment of responsibility for climate migrants' displacement could help to reshape public opinion toward them.
[110] Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*, p. 147.
[111] Achiume, "Migration as Decolonization," p. 1553.
[112] As Achiume puts it, such migration "enhances individual self-determination within neocolonial empire, irrespective of its implications for the collective self-determination of Third World nation-states." Achiume, "Migration as Decolonization," p. 1522.
[113] For an overview of recent discourses surrounding a planetary just transition, see Dimitris Stevis and Romain Felli, "Planetary Just Transition? How Inclusive and How Just?," *Earth System Governance* 6, 100065 (December 2020), pp. 1–11.
[114] Benhabib, "The End of the 1951 Refugee Convention?," p. 79.
[115] Bradley and Noronha, *Against Borders*. The authors point out that this conceit "requires a deep historical amnesia about colonialism, and an unwillingness to consider ongoing relations of economic domination" (p. 3).

Abstract: Much mainstream political philosophy assumes that states have a broad right to decide who is granted entry and membership into their political community. On this conventional view, admission of migrants and refugees is understood as mostly a matter of general humanitarian duty or voluntary beneficence rather than as a specific obligation of justice. Through an analysis of climate-related migration from Central America's Dry Corridor to the United States, I argue that many such migrants may in fact be owed admission as reparation for injustice, and that the character of this injustice raises broader challenges for the conventional view.

Keywords: climate migration, immigration ethics, border imperialism, reparative justice, sovereignty

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