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RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

RIVERS & BORDERS



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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IN REVIEW

THE GREAT DISPLACEMENT: CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE NEXT AMERICAN MIGRATION BY JAKE BITTLE

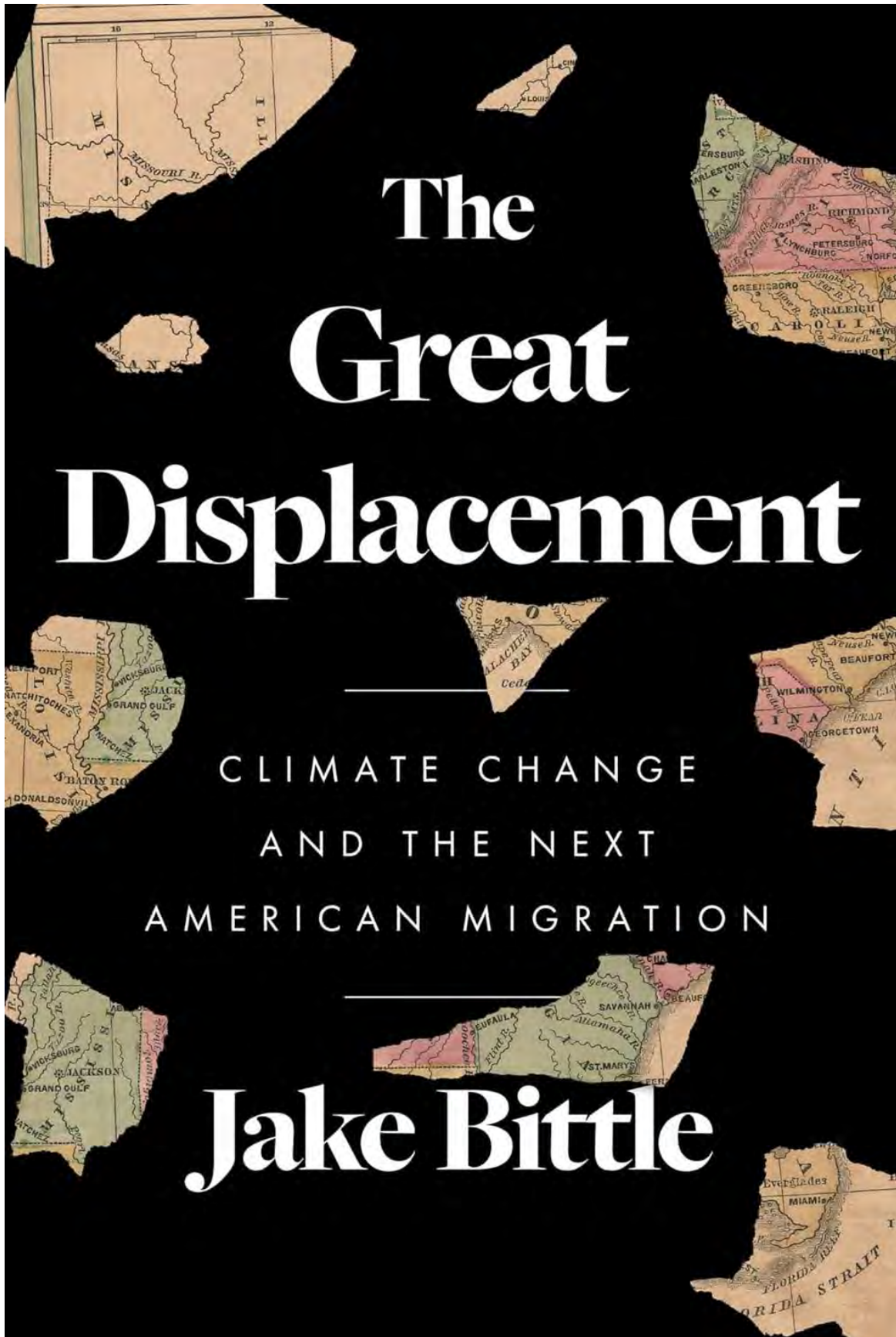
By Julia Oschwald Tilton

Abandoned homes with boarded up windows. Mold growing up the walls of houses flooded under five feet of water. The charred remnants of entire neighborhoods turned to ash. Fields of white cotton turned brown, the soil below

choked with drought. In his new book, *The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration*, Jake Bittle paints a startling picture of the havoc climate change is wreaking upon various regions of our country.



Remains of a neighborhood destroyed by Hurricane Irma in Big Pine Key, Florida on Wednesday, September 20, 2017. Photo by J.T. Blatty / FEMA.



'The Great Displacement, Climate Change and the Next American Migration' by Jake Bittle.

But more stark than the images of the landscapes destroyed are the stories of the humans who call these places home.

With vivid storytelling and compassionate reporting, Bittle uses a wide range of histories and communities to introduce the reader to the human geography of climate change in this collection. The author crafts intimate portraits of the real lives and losses of people from the bayous of Louisiana, the deserts of Arizona, and the coastal wetlands of Texas, Florida, and North Carolina. As he takes readers across the country, his reporting paints an ever-expanding picture of the devastating realities of climate change unfolding in the lives of Americans today.

Bittle breaks the beginning of the book into sections that represent the three major forces that he identifies as creating climate displacement: weather disasters, government policy, and the private housing market. The ways in which these three forces interact differ as we journey through various states and stories, but all three are important to consider while taking in both the destruction that climate change has already ravaged upon many American communities, as well as how our society hopes to react in the face of such damage and uncertainty.

In some ways, these stories are nothing new. We are inundated with broadcasts about intensifying hurricanes, unstoppable wildfires, and disastrous flooding. Climate change hitting our country is no newsflash. Yet story after story, these snapshots of real Americans already acutely affected by climate change had a cumulative effect. By the end of the book, I found it difficult to read, to continue to bear witness to the destruction without any solution in sight. I waited for answers from Bittle to the major questions he was posing: What will happen to the millions displaced by climate change? What do we owe to those in our society who will lose their homes and communities to these disasters in the decades to come? Can we continue to afford to bail people out of disasters? Can we afford to relocate all the people who will

ultimately need to move? What should we be doing to prepare for this next great migration?

Bittle addresses some of these questions at the end of the book, but the painful reality seems to be that good answers may not yet exist to many of them. We can study the trends of climate migration so far, but the true influx of climate refugees in this country has yet to happen, and the short-term movement patterns of those who have been displaced due to climate change have been chaotic and unpredictable. The answer to the question of whether or not we can continue to afford to bail people out of climate disasters is becoming clear as we watch insurance companies pull out of fire-prone areas, and as we witness the stories of the many families in this book who received little to no help after their homes were flooded or burned. The government can only do so much to support communities affected by climate change, and continuing to rebuild in areas that are unsafe to live is not a sustainable strategy. The harsh truth is that millions of people all over the country will be forced to leave their homes within the next century.

Bittle's reporting serves as a prescient warning of the imminent danger imposed by decades of human hubris. The United States has consistently valued growth and profit over all else, as demonstrated by developers finding ways to gerrymander flood maps to continue expanding cities beyond the lines of sensible safety precautions; lenient laws about risk disclosure from home sellers leaving buyers uninformed and at great risk; and endless development of fossil fuel infrastructure literally erasing historic communities on the coastline. All of these instances of prioritizing the desires of a greedy consumption machine are happening in an already unequal society, and as is too often the case, the brunt of the burden of these choices is being borne by the marginalized members of our society. The less affluent have fewer options when it comes to relocation after disaster, and as Bittle illustrates again and again in this book, rural and poor communities are

often less likely to receive sufficient federal aid and protection.

In fact, two of the major examples he highlights are communities of color that were erased in “managed retreat” efforts (43). One of these places is Lincoln City, a historic Black neighborhood in Kinston, North Carolina. Lincoln City was a small, tight-knit community, made up of eight hundred working class families. Members of the community spoke fondly of their home—the three big churches, childhood bike rides down Lincoln Street, and teenagers sneaking off to the “sand hole” by the banks of the Neuse River (36). In

1999, Hurricane Floyd caused major flooding in eastern North Carolina, which swelled the Neuse River and drowned Lincoln City under five feet of water. In its aftermath, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) decided to buy out the community entirely, writing each homeowner a check for their home if they, in turn, agreed to move. This shuttering of an entire community was the government’s first experiment in what Bittle calls “coordinated climate migration” (37).

Managed retreat through government buyouts is a tactic that is still in use, enacted when the government determines the cost of rebuilding



Pactolus, just northeast of Kinston, is accessible only by boat after Hurricane Floyd caused the flood-swollen Tar River to overflow its banks. Image via NCPedia.

and protecting certain communities outweighs their value. This calculation, of course, favors communities with higher land value and property tax revenue, meaning the first places to have been erased by managed retreat and buyout efforts have often been poor communities of color. Despite this inequitable outcome, the writing is on the wall: some wealthier and more privileged communities have been given the means to stay for now, but continuing to build and remain in areas that are so deeply threatened by the crises of climate change is a fool's errand. There is only so much money can do to protect homes from historic flooding and wildfires.

What Bittle accomplishes in this book is giving the reader a glimpse into the lived experiences of people who live in areas that are so obviously

vulnerable to the devastation of climate change. I have often found myself boggled by the number of people who continue to purchase property in high climate-risk areas. Bittle explains that, of course, people choose to live somewhere for many reasons: history, culture, family, jobs, cost of living, and more. It is no easier to leave your history behind and move away from your familiar community when it's in a floodplain than it is when your home is anywhere else. People want to stay in their homes for obvious reasons that are human and relatable. But Bittle also explains that, counterintuitively, folks who have experienced major climate disasters are often *more* likely to stay put than to leave, thinking that if they survived one calamitous hurricane, another one that severe is unlikely to happen anytime soon. The cruelty of climate change is



*Remains of Hurricane Irma's damage in Marathon, Florida on Sunday, September 17, 2017.
Photo by J.T. Blatty/FEMA.*

that weather events that used to occur once every hundred years are now happening with such great frequency that this logic no longer stands. Bittle highlights this point by sharing the commitments of people who returned to small islands in Key West, Florida after Hurricane Irma devastated the region in 2017. They attempted to rebuild their homes and lives despite the certainty of constant flooding in the decades to come due to sea-level rise and the increasing frequency of tropical storms. The precarity of these islands is so severe in the face of climate change, that Bittle describes the archipelago as “doomed” (26). Yet, after each disaster, people return.

What all of these regions and stories have in common is water—its scarcity or abundance. The ways in which the lack of water or its inevitable rising are changing landscapes and lives are harrowing. What does it mean for those of us who live in places like Minnesota, the land of 10,000 lakes, as we watch others in our nation at the

mercy of drying rivers, unyielding droughts, and entire homes and lives washed away in floods? In more temperate climates, it can be easier to minimize the threat of climate change compared to regions where destructive weather disasters are increasingly commonplace. While it’s certainly true that there are areas of the country where the threats of climate change loom much larger, Bittle’s message is clear: climate change is coming for all of us.

Bittle tells us that aside from all the horrifying weather disasters that are threatening people’s homes, the largest factor that will drive climate migration in decades to come is heat. “The moderate temperate zone that scientists call ‘human climate niche’, which in the United States now stretches from South Dakota to the Sunbelt, will shift northward so that by 2070 its northern edge reaches into Canada and its southern edge ends around Kentucky” (267). These drastic changes in temperature will cause large areas of the country



Aerial image capturing the Duluth Aerial Lift Bridge, Canal Park, and downtown Duluth. Taken over Lake Superior in June 2021.

to become more and more difficult and dangerous to inhabit. Those who live in the northern regions of the country will watch their communities radically change as the numbers of climate refugees grow in the coming decades. What is being done in these more climate-friendly regions to prepare for these changes?

In some areas, this change is already becoming apparent. While Bittle argues that the true migration of climate refugees has yet to begin in earnest, he explains that most people who have left disaster-prone cities already have chosen to move to comparable nearby cities, such as moving from New Orleans, Louisiana to Dallas, Texas or Mobile, Alabama to Atlanta, Georgia. Despite this trend, some have already begun to make further moves, like the families from California and Colorado who are now calling Minnesota home, in the city Tulane professor Jesse Keenan dubbed “climate-proof Duluth” (quoted in Kamin 2023). When wealthy climate refugees arrive in

small Midwestern cities with the sale money from their coastal real estate, it is only a matter of time before housing prices are driven up, in what is being called “climate gentrification.” What happens to the members of these communities as they get priced out of the housing market? The shortage of affordable housing is a problem everywhere, and the influx of climate refugees will only continue to worsen this problem in places where these waves of people are expected to land. Whether you live in an area from which climate refugees need to escape or into which they’ll need to move, it’s clear displacement on this scale will have ripple effects across our entire nation.

The Great Displacement left me with more questions than answers, which seems fitting of a book utilizing contemporary climate disasters as parables for what is to come. The answers haven’t arrived yet. What is clear, though, is that we will all be living into them together.

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Julia Oswald Tilton is a nonfiction writer living in Minneapolis, MN. She is a first year M.F.A. candidate in the University of Minnesota’s creative writing program, where she is a College of Liberal Arts Fellow. Julia is an oral storyteller, an educator, and is always finding new ways to explore in her kitchen. She spent 11 years teaching young children all over the world, and in her first year away from the elementary classroom in over a decade what she misses most is read-aloud.