

LIMEN

Journal of the Hungarian Migration Research Institute

6 (2022/2)



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P. O. Box 155, H-1518 Budapest, Hungary
info@migraciokutato.hu

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Boats of migrants floating on the sea, photo: shutterstock.com

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Table of Contents

Viktor MARSÁI Gatekeeper countries – Key to stopping illegal immigration	4
Sára KMECZKÓ Further Externalization of EU Migration Policy: The Reinforced Gatekeeping Role of North African States	25
Árpád PÁRDUCZ Mandatory or Discretionary Admission? – The Relocation Agreements of The European Union	46
Meszár TÁRIK – KLAUDIA TÓTH Europe’s Bastion: The Role of Morocco in the Migration System of the Western Mediterranean region	54
Paul MARITZ “Beefing-Up” the border: Considering the ANC’s new vigour	76
Book recommendation by Omar SAYFO Jake Bittle: The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration. Simon & Schuster, 2023	90
Book recommendation by Klaudia TÓTH Ingrid Boas: Climate Migration and Security: Securitisation as a Strategy in Climate Change Politics. Routledge, 2017	93
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	96

Book recommendation by Omar Sayfo

Jake Bittle: *The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration*. Simon & Schuster, 2023

The term “climate migration” seeks to elucidate the reasons behind individuals relocating from one place to another. It ascribes a primary motivation to movements that can be undertaken either willingly or unwillingly, temporarily, or permanently. Nevertheless, even when the primary reason for migration is clear, numerous additional elements affect the timing, destination, and manner in which an individual responds to a disaster by moving. Such complexity is mirrored in the concept of “displacement”: the migratory changes brought about by climate change are as turbulent and unpredictable as the weather events that instigate them.

Jake Bittle’s “*The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration*” is a bold and ambitious journalistic account that offers a comprehensive picture of the profound transformations climate change is causing in American society. Unlike academic volumes on migration forced by climate change, Bittle’s book provides a human-centered narrative with an American focus. Among many others, we accompany Patrick Garvey and Jen DeMaria as they gaze into the eye of a hurricane ravaging their Florida Keys community. Through their perspective, we witness the unimaginable devastation, with sailboats overturned, trees uprooted, and streets rendered unrecognizable. We join the Tran family in their car as they speed through the streets of their California neighborhood, fleeing an approaching wildfire. The following day, we scroll on Google Maps to locate the scorched, vacant lot that once held their home.

The title of the book is a reference to the Great Migration, a movement whereby approximately six million Black Americans left the South to evade Jim Crow laws and seek economic prospects in cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York from the early 20th century to the mid-20th century. However, the forthcoming displacement forecasted by the author for the 21st century is poised to surpass this historical migration, giving rise to what he characterizes as a “generation of domestic climate migrants”. Climate change is expected to force the relocation of a minimum of 20 million Americans by the end of this century. The book sensitively narrates the experiences of those who have already suffered such trauma, all the while illustrating the profound impact climate change is poised to have

on American lives. This impact includes the obliteration of longstanding towns and villages, the migration of people towards new regions, and the fundamental reshaping of the geographical landscape in the United States. What makes “The Great Displacement” outstanding is its ability to go beyond the overwhelming and ungraspable statistics, and this is largely attributed to Jake Bittle’s unwavering investigative work. Through the narratives he has gathered, we gain insight into human nature in its unfiltered and fundamental form. In-depth interviews were conducted with individuals, breathing life into the human dimensions of climate change, offering a vivid portrayal of the trials faced by those forced to abandon their homes. The book encompasses accounts of Americans displaced due to wildfires in California; drought in Arizona; rising sea levels in Norfolk, Virginia, and southern Louisiana; as well as storms such as Hurricane Harvey in Houston, Hurricane Irma in the Florida Keys, and Hurricanes Fran and Floyd in North Carolina. Regrettably, it is often the economically disadvantaged and marginalized who bear the brunt of these impacts, while the affluent and privileged tend to receive the most substantial support from the disaster relief system. Bittle advocates government intervention, arguing for the implementation of policies to tackle the scarcity of affordable housing, ensuring that housing accessibility is a reality for everyone both before and after disasters occur.

While the portraits may become somewhat overwhelming, there is a clear rationale behind this approach. Bittle’s strength as a journalist lies in his ability to construct human-centered profiles of his subjects by meticulously collecting and presenting intimate details within just a page or two. Additionally, he adeptly formulates compelling narratives about the catastrophes that have dramatically altered the lives of his sources.

“The Great Displacement” is a timely contribution shedding light on the climate-change-driven mass migration that is already in motion, and of its strong potential to bring societal upheaval. It serves as a reminder that Americans and non-Americans alike bear a direct responsibility to take action in order to mitigate the most dire consequences of this crisis. Bittle’s concluding recommendations encompass a call for the reduction of climate-altering emissions, an escalation in investment in post-disaster assistance and climate adaptation strategies, a reform of the National Flood Insurance Program and the private fire insurance sector, an expansion of opportunities for international climate migrants to enter the United States, and a resolution to the shortage of affordable housing by ensuring housing accessibility for everyone, both before and after disasters.

The book offers a riveting examination of the evolving landscape of America, highlighting the ongoing and forthcoming transformations as climate change inflicts upheaval on the nation and its residents. While Bittle concludes the book on an optimistic note, he remains mindful of the considerable impact that has already been inflicted: “When a community disappears, so does a map that orients us in the world.”

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