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The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration by Jake Bittle

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The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration by Jake Bittle* (Simon & Schuster, 368 Pages; 2023)

From January to September 2023, the U.S. endured 24 separate weather and climate disasters, resulting in losses exceeding \$67.1 billion.¹ These numbers, though astoundingly high, fail to convey the personal stories of people like Becca and Sergio Fuentes. The couple purchased their first home located about twenty miles west of downtown Houston in 2017. At the time, they were expecting twins, and they appreciated the location because the neighborhood children could walk to elementary school without crossing any streets. Since the home was not in a flood zone, the couple opted not to purchase flood insurance. However, after years of saving for a down payment and new home furniture, Hurricane Harvey devastated their plans by flooding their home. Without flood insurance the couple faced limited options. While Becca and their twins stayed in a cramped apartment with Becca's mother, Sergio spent hours working on repairs. Despite Sergio's determination, only the studs were salvageable, and eventually, the couple was compelled to sell.

The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration highlights stories like the Fuentes': stories of the people displaced by climate change. These stories include those of low-income families and wealthy ones, young professionals and elderly couples in retirement, residents of Santa Rosa, California and those in Norfolk, Virginia.

Bittle also delineates the local policies, federal programs, and private markets that intentionally and unintentionally shape homeowner decisions following climate disasters.

Bittle attributes most climate displacement to weather disasters, government policy, and the private housing market. Well-intentioned government officials have relied on available technologies and information to enact development-friendly city ordinances. Development benefits communities by expanding the tax base and bringing new jobs and affordable housing. However, Bittle notes that developers and government officials often lack a long-term vision when assessing risks. For instance, certain coastal cities on the outer Gulf of Mexico have excavated channels and lined them with concrete for residential development to prepare for offshore drilling rigs. Although they were not located in a flood zone, the residents were now vulnerable to floods. Bittle also describes how California, in line with federal practices, managed its forests to protect the timber industry, inadvertently allowing for larger, more destructive wildfires that burned thousands of homes. Further, Bittle highlights how Arizona's diversion of water historically used for farming to support Phoenix's growth forced many family farms out of business.

Climate displacement incurs significant costs for families and the federal government. However, Bittle reminds readers that climate displacement is a

* Jake Bittle is a reporter who covers climate change, energy, housing, and a number of other topics. He is currently a staff writer at *Grist* covering climate impacts and adaptation.

1. *The U.S. just had its 7th-warmest September on record*, NAT'L OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMIN. (Oct. 10, 2023), <https://www.noaa.gov/news/us-just-had-its-7th-warmest-september-on-record#:~:text=From%20January%20through%20the%20end,Two%20flooding%20events> (last visited Feb. 11, 2024).

profitable business for some industries. In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, speculators and investors flocked to Houston and purchased damaged homes. These investors could afford to buy cheap homes, repair them, and rent them to displaced families, yielding attractive returns on investment. Meanwhile, the average homeowner could only rely on government financial assistance, primarily for temporary housing, while adjusters slowly processed claims for home repairs. As displaced individuals saw their bank accounts dwindle, many decided to sell their homes at below-normal prices. Quick access to funds allowed some to purchase properties at remarkably low prices. Others also viewed climate disasters positively. For example, a homeowner in Santa Rosa, California, expressed relief that a forest fire cleared trees behind his home, providing a clearer view of the valley. The forest fire may have only destroyed visual obstructions for him, but it completely destroyed the homes of other families.

Bittle also weighs historical policy changes by FEMA. In 1994, Congress authorized FEMA to allocate a portion of its budget to mitigate future damages, shifting from solely rebuilding after homes were damaged. Recognizing that FEMA often rebuilt homes multiple times, Congress directed FEMA to implement what Bittle refers to as a “managed retreat” policy. In 1996, Hurricane Fran caused extensive flooding in Kinston, North Carolina, prompting half the residents of the historically black neighborhood of Lincoln City to evacuate. The city’s Emergency Management Department submitted a buyout application to FEMA, requesting the purchase of Lincoln City homes to facilitate relocation to safer areas. The Department completed the “mountain of FEMA paperwork,” but they faced a second challenge; the buyouts had to be voluntary, and many residents did not want to leave. Homes were often passed down generationally, leaving residents reluctant to leave because of deep familial and historical ties. After a second hurricane forced residents to evacuate again only three years later, residents slowly began supporting the application until FEMA eventually bought out the entire neighborhood.

Bittle recounts stories of residents grateful for the opportunity to restart their lives in safe homes after buyouts, contrasting with others who lamented saying goodbye to historical and familial ties. Lincoln City, established as a haven for people who were recently freed from slavery after the Civil War, held sentimental value for many elderly residents. Bittle juxtaposes buyout programs for low-income communities with million-dollar investments in seawalls and beach restoration in vacation destinations like the Outer Banks, highlighting inequities resulting from government resource allocation decisions.

A second edition or follow up to this book that delves more deeply into policy and the framework behind federal agencies like FEMA would complement *The Great Displacement* well. Understanding how the current system evolved could help readers avoid similar mistakes. More information detailing current climate policies, analyzing their impact on constituents, and introducing readers to new policies enacted amidst a fractured political landscape would provide a valuable continuation of Bittle’s work.

The Great Displacement is a compelling read. It explores how the personal devastation resulting from climate change and the systemic policies tackling its effects intersect. At the heart of this book are the intimate firsthand stories of climate migrants, and it also appeals to scholars and practitioners interested in advocating

for current and future climate migrants. Anyone can glean lessons from the successes and failures of the government programs of the past and present that Bittle highlights here.

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