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Border and Migration Controls and Migrant Precarity in the Context of Climate Change

Nicole Bates-Eamer

Department of Political Science, University of Victoria, PO Box 1700 STN CSC, Victoria, BC V8R4J4, Canada; nbeamer@uvic.ca

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Abstract: Climate change impacts natural and human systems, including migration patterns. But isolating climate change as the driver of migration oversimplifies a complex and multicausal phenomenon. This article brings together the literature on global migration and displacement, environmental migration, vulnerability and precarity, and borders and migration governance to examine the ways in which climate-induced migrants experience precarity in transit. Specifically, it assesses the literature on the ways in which states create or amplify precarity in multiple ways: through the use of categories, by externalizing borders, and through investments in border infrastructures. Overall, the paper suggests that given the shift from governance regimes purportedly based on protection and facilitation to regimes based on security, deterrence, and enforcement, borders are complicit in producing and amplifying the vulnerability of migrants. The phenomenon of climate migration is particularly explicative in demonstrating how these regimes, which categorize individuals based on why they move, are and will continue to be unable to manage future migration flows.

Keywords: climate change; environmental migration; border controls; migration policy; precarity

1. Introduction

Climate change is altering our world. Scientists anticipate detrimental effects on our natural and human systems (IPCC 2018). We are, however, already witnessing such effects from flooding and forest fires to sea-level rise and extreme weather events. These subsequently threaten human settlements through losses of housing, livelihoods, and social and cultural resources, and impact human migration patterns and large-scale population displacements (IPCC 2014, 2018). Experts forecast a future increase in the displacements of people, specifically from Africa, small island states, and Asian deltas inhabited by millions of people (IOM 2018; IPCC 2014; Klepp 2017). And yet, current media headlines regarding the migrant crisis in the EU and the migrant caravans in Central America *already* draw links between current migration patterns and climate change: *Central Americans Farmers Head to the U.S., Fleeing Climate Change* (Semple 2019); *How Climate Change is Fueling the U.S. Border Crisis* (Blitzer 2019); and *Climate Change 'Will Create the World's Biggest Refugee Crisis'* (Taylor 2017). Isolating climate change as the driver of migration, however, oversimplifies a complex and multicausal phenomenon.

The injustice of climate change is that those who have caused it are not the ones who suffer most from its consequences (UNDP 2008; Scott 2014). The impacts are disproportionately borne out on countries of the Global South and poorer communities in the Global North, or more specifically, on communities that are already vulnerable and on individuals who are already living in poverty and precarity. There is a wicked irony in that those who leave their communities can potentially become *more* precarious as they join the millions of rural to urban, regional and/or international migrants around the world. As I explore in this paper, their precarity is amplified because of the ways in which border and migration controls have become increasingly selective and restrictive.

This paper brings together the literature on global migration and displacement, environmental migration, vulnerability and precarity, and borders and migration governance to examine the ways in which environmental migrants experience precarity in transit. Specifically, it considers the literature on the ways in which states *create* or amplify precarity in multiple ways: through the use of categories, by externalizing borders, and through investments in border infrastructures. Overall, the paper argues that given the shift from governance regimes purportedly based on protection and facilitation to regimes based on security, deterrence, and enforcement, borders are complicit in producing and amplifying the vulnerability of migrants. The challenge in linking this argument to the precarity of climate migrants specifically is that climate migrants are both difficult to identify and particularly vulnerable to these regimes precisely because of their ambiguity. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of climate migration is explicative in demonstrating how these regimes, which categorize individuals based on why they move, are and will continue to be unable to manage future migration flows.

The paper begins with a discussion of the current state of global migration and displacement to set the context for the subsequent section on climate and migration. A review of the climate change and migration literature leads to the argument that climate migrants are *not* their own class of migrants, but rather that climate change intersects and complicates the multiple factors that influence migrants' decisions. As such, when the section on border and migration governance discusses the impact of selective migration categories and restrictive border controls on migrants' precarity, it inherently includes climate migrants in this assessment.

2. Global Migration and Displacement

2.1. International Migrants

Whereas the majority of people around the world live in the country where they were born, the number of people living outside their country of birth is on the rise. This is largely as result of the integration of the global economy which created new and more mobile pools of labor that in turn created stronger networks across the globe and opened up even more avenues, pathways, and opportunities for migration (Sassen 1988). In effect, by 2017, 258 million people were international migrants (IOM 2018). The International Organization for Migration (IOM n.d.) broadly defines international migrants "as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border . . . away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is." As such, the term includes economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and irregular migrants, which will each be discussed subsequently.

Although several scholars note that as a percentage of world population, the proportion of international migrants has remained stable at around three percent since 1960 (see de Haas and Czaika 2014; McKenna 2017; European Union 2017), the ratio has been increasing. The number of international migrants grew by 50 percent since 2000, while global population increased at a rate of 24 percent; and since 1990, the rate of increase in the number of international migrants has been increasingly steadily and faster than global population growth ((IOM 2018), author's calculations). While more people than ever before are living outside their country of birth, the vast majority of this international migration is considered "safe, orderly, and regular".

Millions of people cross borders every day, and the majority are welcomed upon arrival (Nanopoulos et al. 2016, p. 2). Migrants are seen for both their potential—as agents of change, with the skills and the abilities to improve living standards—and for their precarity—victims of capitalist global relations forced into precarious work and life conditions and exploited by the international system (Porst and Sakdapolarak 2018, p. 36). From a border management perspective, there is nothing inherently anxiety-inducing, threatening, or challenging about increases in the movements of people, although the rhetoric regarding the migrant "crisis" and Trump's call for walls along the southern borders may suggest otherwise. What is justifiably of concern, however, is the increasing number of

migrants who are either forcibly displaced or are “irregular”. These movements are less safe, orderly, and regular and have implications at and beyond borders.

2.2. Refugees and Asylum Seekers

International law distinguishes between political migrants and economic migrants—often referred to as “forced” versus “voluntary” migrants, a binary which grossly oversimplifies the causes and dynamics of migration. Political or forced migrants can be categorized as “refugees” or “asylum seekers” and have a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, ethnicity, or membership in a specific political or social group. At a border, refugees and asylum seekers are entitled to international protections, and the principle of *non-refoulement* which means they cannot be returned to where they have fled. Economic migrants, however, who move “voluntarily”, have no international protection rights at the border, and their crossings are more likely to be governed by national immigration laws and policies based on the receiving country’s labor or demographic needs. Therefore, distinguishing the degree of volition in a migrant’s movement is important because it determines rights and responsibilities under international law.

Forced displacements—when people are forced to move from their home because of conflict, violence, fear of persecution, and/or disasters—are on the rise. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has a mandate for protecting those displaced by conflict, persecution or generalized violence. Since 2005, the number of people under the purview of the UNHCR has grown from 20.8 million people to 68.5 million people (UNHCR 2006, 2018a); and by 2017, there were 25.4 million refugees who had fled their countries to escape conflict and persecution (UNHCR 2018a). The UNHCR attributes the increase over time to new displacements outpacing the rate of returns (UNHCR 2018a). Conflict *newly* displaced 16.2 million people in 2017, the majority of whom were displaced within their own countries (UNHCR 2018a). Weather-related disasters, however, displace many more people than conflicts. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre publishes an annual report on *internal* displacement disaggregated by disasters and conflict; in addition to the 10.8 million displaced internally by conflicts in 2018, weather-related disasters displaced 17.2 million people (IDMC 2019). The IDMC Director, Alexandra Bilak, points out that these numbers equate to 80,000 people displaced *each day* (IDMC n.d.). While many of these people will return to their homes if and when conditions change, the number of individuals in need of protection is daunting.

Although the term “international migrant” includes everyone on the move, the designation of refugees and asylum seekers as a type of forced migration implies that economic migrants move of their own volition to seek employment opportunities. This assumes a false binary of migration decisions—either forced or voluntary—in an increasingly connected but highly unequal world; it also ignores the broader structural and climate factors that influence these decisions. But before discussing the latter, a brief discussion on “irregular migrants” is necessary because it reveals the ways in which border and migration policies are implicated in the creation of such designations.

2.3. Irregular Migrants

“Irregular”, “unauthorized”, or “undocumented” migrants are those who “enter, stay, or work in a country without the necessary authorization or documents required under immigration regulations” (IOM n.d). Irregular migration is a governance challenge for states and for migrants themselves, who are exposed to greater levels of insecurity, vulnerability, and precarity (Koser 2005). “Irregular” refers to the migratory status; it does not indicate the cause of movement (forced or voluntary) nor does it refer to the individual per se, whose status can change during transit or in the country of destination. For example, a family could enter a country irregularly with forged documents or across a border where there is no point of entry, but then immediately apply for asylum, thus changing their status from “irregular”. Alternatively, and more frequently, migrants enter a state with proper documentation and then overstay their visas, henceforth shifting their status to “irregular”. One result of the fluctuating status of irregular migrants is that reliable statistics or data are generally not available.

Although the phenomenon is difficult to track precisely because the migration falls outside the regulatory systems and is clandestine by nature, many countries do have estimates of irregular migrants. In the United States, the Pew Research Center estimates there were 10.6 million unauthorized immigrants living in the US in 2016 (Passel and Cohn 2018).¹ The number increased steadily from 3.5 million unauthorized immigrants in 1990, peaked with 12.2 in 2007, and has been declining since (Passel and Cohn 2018). Over 66 percent of these unauthorized immigrants have resided in the US for over ten years; and combining this statistic with the decreasing number of unauthorized arrivals supports the belief that the vast majority of irregular migrants are those who overstay their authorization rather than those who enter through irregular channels or without legitimate documentation (Passel and Cohn 2018; Alfred 2016; Warren 2019). The literature has identified more restrictive migration controls and laws in host countries as a main source in the increase in number of “irregular” migrants since the 1990s (Bertossi 2008; Cummings et al. 2015; de Haas 2011; De Haas et al. 2014; McNevin 2017). These restrictions interrupt circulatory migration and push migrants into (irregular) permanent settlement. Historical examples of Moroccans’ circulatory migration to Spain before Schengen and then increased permanent settlement and illegal boat migration after 1991 demonstrate the unintended consequences of restricted borders. The same has occurred in the United States: with migratory Mexicans, the border wall and increased restrictions discourage Mexicans from leaving the United States instead of preventing them from arriving as the statistics above indicate. Despite the increase in the number of “irregular” Mexican migrants in the US between 1990 and 2007 however, and perhaps counterintuitively given the discourse from the current US administration, since the 2008 recession, more Mexicans have *left* the United States than entered (Minian 2017): a net loss of 140,000 between 2009 and 2014 (Gonzalez-Barrera 2015), and the rate of undocumented migration from Mexico to the US is approaching zero (Massey 2018).

“Irregular” migration refers to how people migrate (and are governed state policies—see below), not why people migrate. Nevertheless, the preceding discussion highlights why it is important to know why people move; historically, those who are forced to move are entitled to international protection, those who choose to move are not. Sassen (1998, p. 56), however, claims that migrations are not autonomous processes—they “do not just happen; they are produced. And migrations do not involve just any possible combination of countries; they are patterned”. The impact of climate change on migration and displacement supports this claim and has gained increasing attention from scholars, policy-makers, and the public at large in recent years. The next section explores this phenomenon.

3. Climate Change and Migration

Humans have irrevocably changed the climate. Climate change is not a future conditional phenomenon; the 2018 Special Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—the body which assesses, collates, and reports on climate science—stated with *high confidence* that the “impacts on natural and human systems from global warming have already been observed. Many land and ocean ecosystems and some of the services they provide have already changed due to global warming.” (IPCC 2018, A.3.1). Climate change has direct impacts on human and natural systems, including human migration patterns and large-scale population displacement through sea-level rise, droughts and floods, extreme weather events, loss of housing, loss of livelihoods, food and water insecurity, and health risks (IPCC 2014). In the last decade, 175 million people have been displaced by weather-related disasters (IDMC 2018). While there is significant research on climate change impacts, we need to better understand the effects of climate change on migration decisions and the movement of people associated with environmental change so that our migration and border systems can respond accordingly.

¹ The Migration Policy Institute estimated 11.3 million unauthorized immigrants in 2016—thus confirming the unreliability of this data (Zong et al. 2019).

Early influential reports used the figure of the “climate refugee” to describe those fleeing rising seas, abandoning low-lying islands, escaping droughts, and relocating after horrific disasters. For example, Myers (1993, 1997, 2002), Stern (2007), and Christian Aid (2007) warned that hundreds of millions or possibly a billion “environmental refugees” threatened global order fleeing “developing countries” en masse with dramatic impacts on host regions, including “problems of political, social, and economic sorts . . . leading to conflict and violence” (Myers 2002, p. 611). Articles in popular media, such as Kaplan’s 1994 piece in *The Atlantic*, entitled ‘The Coming Anarchy’, heightened policy-makers’ and the public’s concern around the issue. The sensationalized and alarmist discourse about “climate refugees” isolated environmental change as *the* push factor and framed the phenomenon as a threat to receiving regions—thus contributing to the securitization of migration in political debates and policies. The result was an oversimplified and highly politicized understanding of new dynamics driving an old phenomenon.

In response to the environmental determinism of earlier debates, scholars have incorporated the vast literature and knowledge from migration, adaptation, and disaster risk and resilience studies. Black et al. (2011) went beyond static push–pull factors and modeled how climate change interacts with other drivers of migration, including environmental, political, economic, cultural, and social factors. McLeman (2014) incorporates vulnerability into this model for understanding how climate change influences the calculation of migration decisions. The decision to move or stay is usually taken at the individual and household levels and in response to a complex set of multiple factors. McLeman (2014, p.67) emphasizes the relationship between various forms of adaptation and migration in the face of climate variability and vulnerability. Migration is one form of adaptation (McLeman and Smit 2006; Tacoli 2009). McLeman (2014, p. 67) argues that migration (M) in the context of vulnerability is a function of the exposure (E) to a climatic stimulus, the sensitivity (S) of the population to that stimulus, and the in situ adaptation (A) options other than migration; he refers to this as the *MESA Function*: $M = f(E, S, (A-M))$. McLeman and Smit (2006) note that neither exposure nor adaptive capacity (related to household income) are static over space and time and can lead to different migration outcomes for individuals exposed to the same climatic stimuli. Adaptation can occur at national, local, and household levels and depends on the capacity to adapt—either in situ or through migration.

Drawing on the disaster risk reduction literature, climate “disasters” occur at the intersection of hazard or stimuli and vulnerability. According to Blaikie et al. (1994), without hazards, there is no risk of disaster, and there are no disasters without vulnerability. As such, the analysis of causality from climate stimuli/hazard to migration are entirely on the vulnerability side of the risk equation because the occurrence of hazard cannot be controlled or removed. Political ecology recognizes the political, economic, social, and historical forces and conditions that influence vulnerabilities and the capacities of population (Oliver-Smith 2012; Stojanov et al. 2014). The geographical distribution of the destruction of weather-related events illustrates the disproportionate impact on communities in the global south and in the excluded global north which, at the macrolevel, are less resilient and more vulnerable to hazards. The conclusions coming out of these literatures is that conceptualizing or isolating the environment as the primary cause (or indeed isolating any factor) of displacement undermines and negates the complexity, multicausality, and integrated nature of migration drivers.

Empirical studies to date have shown that in the context of climate change, the majority of migration is over short distances and within national borders or regions, short-term or temporary, from rural to urban areas, and tracks pre-existing social networks (Black et al. 2011; Findley 1994; Gray 2009; Klepp 2017; McAdam 2014; McLeman 2013; Obokata et al. 2014; McLeman and Gemeine 2018). Although the global south is more vulnerable to climate change, there are significant regional differences within the global south. In Asia, most people who are displaced are displaced internally from rural to urban areas and do not cross international borders. In West Africa, people migrate across rural international borders during times of droughts and floods without issue because the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has a protocol on the free movement of peoples and their animals. Environmental migration outcomes are contingent upon the unique economic, demographic,

social, political, and cultural conditions of each place in the face of environmental change (Veronis et al. 2018, p. 49). Furthermore, the same environmental stimulus can lead to various migration outcomes (none, internal, international, temporary, etc.). Historically contingent factors, such as colonization, decolonization, and post-colonial relations intersect with ongoing globalization and economic liberalization trends; these factors set the context within which international environmental migrations occur.

This section reveals that a direct link or causal chain between climate change and migration is difficult, if not impossible except in rare circumstances, to isolate. While the environment is already a factor influencing migration, climate change intersects at various levels with multiple drivers of migration (including the environment). In the context of climate variability, migration is a function of the type and degree of exposure to an event, contextual vulnerabilities, and the ability to adapt in situ. The ability to identify environmental migrants, however, is difficult because of a broad definition and the challenge of causality. The IOM (2014, p. 6) defines environmental migrants as “persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.” How does one measure “predominantly” or “obliged”?

While seemingly rhetorical, the distinction between “forced” and “voluntary” migration is important in the policy world. In international law, these categories are mutually exclusive and have implications for migration and border controls and for migrants; those who are *forcibly* displaced are entitled to protection. For someone forcibly displaced by climate change, this is thus far not the case. States design immigration policies based on their demographic needs, and international laws determine individuals’ rights based on the *cause* of movement. But in the context of climate change, isolating the climate as *the* driver oversimplifies migration decisions. As such, the complexities of *why* people move in a changing world are incompatible with the simplistic dichotomy of forced/voluntary and asylum seeker/economic migrant. And yet border and migration policies continue to rely on this distinction despite their inability to make it in reality. This may influence *how* a particular individual migrates because in seeking their destination they may engage in irregular migration or more dangerous migration pathways, both characterized by precarity.

4. Borders Amplifying Migrants’ Precarity

Border and migration governance have become more restrictive to people in various ways. This has occurred in a framework that has prioritized states’ security over individuals’ rights; the result being an amplification of migrants’ precarity and vulnerability. But why have borders become more restrictive to people? Rygiel (2010) traces the history of migration governance through forced mobility and slavery to laissez-faire approaches in the nineteenth century to much stricter border controls which regulate people’s mobility in the contemporary period. Rygiel attributes the increasingly restrictive border controls to “the emergence and expansion of the nation-state as the predominant form of political organization... the expansion of centralized territorial and national state control as well as ... the globalization of the capitalist economy” (Rygiel 2010, p. 5). Since the end of the Cold War and even more so since 9/11, however, states have augmented border controls (Oberoi and Taylor-Nicholson 2013; Rygiel 2010; White 2011). Thus, while borders in the globalization era are more open to trade, finance, communication, capital, and culture, they are simultaneously more tightly regulated and closed to (certain) people (Hollifield 2004)—a tension managed by what border scholars refer to dynamic processes of borders and rebordering (Wastl-Walter 2011; Wilson and Donnan 2012). Bordering processes have become more restrictive to the movement of people by categorizing bodies, spatially detaching the functions of the border from the boundary line and investing in built infrastructures at the boundary. This section will define what is meant by precarity and then turn to how states’ governance of migration and borders amplifies migrants’ precarity.

4.1. Precarity

There are differing conceptions of precarity. Most commonly, scholars have theorized precarity in regard to employment, labor, and working conditions in the context of globalization (Anderson 2010; Esping-Andersen 2013; Kallenberg 2009; Standing 2011). Standing (2011) developed the idea that in the context of globalization, “the precariat” are a class in the making, consisting of “denizens” or those who have a more restricted range of social, cultural, political, and economic rights than citizens around them. The state creates denizens by systematically and deliberately denying people their rights, or what Arendt called “the right to have rights” (Standing 2015). Whereas the literature on precarity grew out of labor market studies, scholars have also extended precarity beyond this context.

Migration scholars have noted that migrants experience multiple forms of vulnerability. Paret and Gleeson (2016, p. 281) summarized the literature on migrants and precarity by noting that “the migrant existence is often precarious in multiple, and reinforcing ways, combining vulnerability to deportation and state violence, exclusion from public services and basic state protections, insecure employment and exploitation at work, insecure livelihood, and everyday discrimination or isolation.” In a similar manner, Goldring et al. (2009, p. 257) explored the ways the migration system and pathways to migration create precariousness in terms of status and access to services, and how these precarious migrants are denied citizenship rights. In the field of critical geography, Waite (2009, p. 416), drawing on Bourdieu, argued that precarity is a general condition marked by uncertainty and instability. While Waite made explicit the structural production of precarity, she also apprehended its political potential and how it can serve as a radical consciousness to unite disparate workers and exploited workers to envision an alternative. The concept of precarity employed here focuses on the vulnerability dimension to understand the implications of migration and border governance on migrants. As such, it brackets out the agency, resiliency, and resourcefulness of migrants, but in no ways does it deny migrants possess these.

Precarity is marked by vulnerability and conditions that threaten one’s life but are outside one’s control. Vulnerability is a condition of defenselessness, insecurity, and exposure to shocks and stress (Chambers 1989). Although the migration scholars cited above explore the politically induced production of migrant precarity *after* transit, many of the critical border and migration scholars have drawn on Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “bare life” as a frame for violations of rights during transit, or at and with borders. Agamben (1998) posited that “states of exception” (a temporary suspension of law) enable “zones of indistinction” between a juridical and a political order. These states of exception are characterized by “bare-life” and are where violations of human rights are possible. These states of exception, where the preeminence and prerogative of state sovereignty trump individual rights, are increasingly becoming the norm. Salter (2006, p. 169) drew on Agamben (1998) and Foucault to claim that an individual is neither citizen nor foreigner at the border because it is a state of exception where rights are suspended. Thus, if we integrate the approaches above, the precarity of migrants is a condition marked by vulnerability and a reduction or suspension of human rights and can occur at multiple stages in a migrant’s life, including at or with the border. Most importantly, this condition of vulnerability is produced. In this regard, the following sections explore the ways in which specific border and migration policies and practices—migrant categories, the spatial stretching of the border, and border infrastructures—produce migrant precarity.²

4.2. Categorizing Migrants Amplifies Precarity

States distinguish between forced and voluntary migrants, but this does not account for the complex and multiple macro and micro factors that drive migration—including climate change (Castles and Miller 2010; Massey et al. 1993; White 2011). As discussed above, the dichotomy of

² Unless otherwise noted, this section specifically refers to the precarity of the migrant *in transit*. For many migrants, they choose to move because they live a life marked by precarity, and in several instances, it persists after their migration.

forced versus voluntary is simplistic, and migrants' motivations for movement evolve over the course of the migration. Furthermore, asylum seekers, refugees, and economic migrants travel together, using existing transit routes and route facilitators (e.g., smugglers). This proves difficult for borders and processing centers. For example, in 2015, some EU member countries classified Afghans as economic migrants instead of asylum seekers, denying them their rights to asylum and protection under international law ([Inter-Agency Regional Analysts Network 2016](#)). A 2015 report by the Overseas Development Institute discussed the complexity of migration:

The evidence reveals that the asylum-seekers and economic migrants often have similar reasons for choosing to make the dangerous journey to Europe and one person may fall into both of these categories at the same time. One common and crucial motivation is their search for a secure livelihood. ([Cummings et al. 2015](#), p. 2)

One person's motives may change in nature and in importance during their journey, suggesting that categorising individuals as 'economic migrants' or 'asylum-seekers' does not reflect the complex and fluid reality of people's experience of migration. ([Cummings et al. 2015](#), p. 4)

Biopolitics provides a useful conceptual lens for the implications of categorizing individuals. [Foucault \(1998, p. 140\)](#) conceptualized biopolitics as the "administration of bodies and the calculated management of life." Border scholars have drawn on this concept to illustrate the corporeal turn in bordering processes and practices in which the focus is on controlling individual bodies, not controlling territorial space ([Amoore 2006](#); [Salter 2006](#); [Vaughan-Williams 2010](#)). One technique of controlling individual bodies is through risk profiling. Risk profiling divides and classifies individuals into desirable and undesirable groups, such as "legitimate" for business and leisure, versus "illegitimate" for "terrorism" and "illegal" activities ([Amoore 2006](#)). Individuals are then governed by passports ([Torpey 1999](#)), biometric technologies, travel passes, visas, and data mining to "regulate their movement accordingly" ([Rygiel 2010, p. 53](#)). These restrictive controls categorize "regular", "legal", and "regulated" forms of migration, which in turn produce "irregular" and "illegal" categories of movement across borders ([DeGenova 2002](#)). The very process of categorizing bodies as undesirable results in some individuals being more precarious because it can force them into irregular migration patterns that are marked by higher degrees of vulnerabilities.

For some, the differentiation or application of category often occurs at or with the border, where the status of a person can change from citizen to tourist, foreigner, alien, and potentially to asylum seeker, refugee, or irregular migrant. According to [Nanopoulos et al. \(2016, p. 2\)](#), "the border is not, however, the place where the categorization can and should take place. It is a place where a check on the identity of the traveler is carried out. Beyond that it is a place where little of any value can be assessed as to the future of the individual." Borders are not neutral; they demarcate belonging and nonbelonging ([Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007, p. ix](#)) and are selectively permeable sites and practices of inclusion and exclusion ([Jones et al. 2017, p. 6](#)). Borders enact immigration policies, aided by non-state actors, that favor some individuals over others, often based on race, ethnicity, nationality, intelligence, and/or employability, and they do so with increasingly restrictive controls. For example, the European Union (EU) has developed a global migrant 'white and black' Schengen list to determine visa applications; perhaps unsurprisingly, Muslim and Global South countries make up the majority of those on the 'visa-required list', thus deliberately excluding the world's poor and people of specific religions ([van Houtum 2010](#)). In this way, states exclude from entry those displaced by climate change, who will overwhelmingly be from countries in the Global South or without the capacity to adapt and build resilience in place.

But beyond creating and applying categories to migrants, thereby governing people instead of territory, these migration governance regimes are increasingly focused on security and enforcement rather than protection and facilitation ([Oberoi and Taylor-Nicholson 2013, p. 173](#)). States subsequently

employ stricter border controls and mechanisms on categorized migrant bodies to restrict individuals from reaching their territory, thereby pushing their borders beyond the territorial limit.

4.3. Deterritorializing Borders Amplifies Precarity

International law requires those seeking asylum to have access to a process for adjudicating their claim upon arriving in a destination country. However, restrictive migration and border policies in northern countries deter and inhibit refugees from accessing these asylum systems by preventing asylum seekers from reaching their territory. In addition to the increasingly selective migration categories, the following examples of border controls demonstrate the ways in which states externalize their borders and keep migrants from reaching their territory. While the majority of migration from climate change will be within countries, those attempting to cross borders will be subjected to these controls.

First, states with maritime borders patrol the waters to prevent people from reaching their shores. The interdiction of people in the Mediterranean Sea and in waters around Australia has shifted from a proactive search and rescue mandate to a militarized border security mission (Moreno-Lax 2017). In these regions, border patrol vessels turn back boats carrying mainly asylum seekers and refugees (although boats also carry other migrants who would not qualify for protection) (UNHCR 2016). This act contravenes the international protection principle of *non-refoulement* and the right to non-arbitrary detention if and when potential claimants are detained in off-shore detention centers (Mountz 2011). In July 2018, the UNHCR reported that Australians had forcibly transferred 3172 refugee and asylum seekers to an off-shore processing facility in Papua New Guinea and Nauru (UNHCR 2018b). These detention centers mirror Agamben's "zones of exclusion" as spaces where human rights are suspended, vulnerabilities exacerbated, and individuals are excluded and reduced to "bare life" (Agamben 1998; Andrijasevic 2010; Bigo 2007). More directly, enhanced border patrols (and engagement of private vessels) at sea amplify migrant precarity in that in order to avoid detection, migrants and smuggling operatives use smaller and less sea-worthy boats—thus increasing the danger of the crossing and their exposure to death.

Second, carrier sanctions prevent people from boarding planes destined for asylum states. The sanctions penalize airlines that allow passengers to board without appropriate travel documents or entry permits. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) oversees this, and their fines to private airline companies is one example of how private industries participate in the privatization of migration management. Baird (2017) reviewed the literature to conclude there is near consensus that carrier sanctions undermine the basic principles of refugee protection and are harmful to asylum seekers and those seeking protection. Carrier sanctions are a tool for externalizing borders to sending regions and reshaping the relations between states, firms, and individuals. Baird (2017, p. 333) argued that this represents "a decline in the moral, ethical, and legal obligations of states and firms towards populations in need of protection." They restrict rights, deter asylum seekers from reaching safe havens, and damage international legal and human rights obligations—all of which enhance migrant precarity.

Finally, agreements that fund migration and border controlling activities with regional transit states also serve to deter migrants' onward movement to asylum states. Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan (2017) identified several bilateral or regional agreements in Asia-Pacific, North America, and Europe in which countries partner with other countries that lack sufficient asylum systems. For example, Australia has agreements with Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia in which Australia funds joint patrols, anti-smuggling operations, and immigration detention centers (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan 2017, p. 36). In the case of the EU, they have externalized migration management through a policy framework, *Global Approach to Migration and Mobility*, which engages with non-EU states specifically to prevent irregular migration to Europe (Hampshire 2016; Frelick et al. 2016). Under this framework, a 2016 EU agreement with Turkey required that all irregular migrants—the majority of which were from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq—crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands be returned back to Turkey on the grounds that Turkey is a "safe third country". Safe third country designation requires

asylum seekers to file for asylum there. As Turkey does not allow non-Europeans to qualify for refugee status (Frelick et al. 2016), this agreement reveals the explicit lack of concern for refugees' rights and protection.

These examples illustrate the ways in which the refugee regime that was once based on protection is now based on deterrence (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan 2017). The increasingly selective migration policies are applied far from the physical location of the border, through bordering practices in remote locations around the world.³ Amoore in Jones et al. (2017) refers to this as the "spatial stretching" of borders. This spatial stretching provides evidence of the shift from borders as territorial demarcations to borders as practices which target individuals not territories (Amoore 2006; Bigo 2002; Rygiel 2013; Salter 2006; Walters 2002). Taken together, the externalization of borders deters asylum seekers from reaching territories where they can claim asylum. Therefore, to the degree that migrants seek migration pathways to alleviate their precarity, these policies make migration more difficult and maintain existing precarities. To the degree that they drive migrants to take more clandestine routes to avoid detection, they amplify precarity. The findings from the empirical studies on migration in the context of climate change that note it is mainly *within* the Global South may be overlooking how containment policies by the Global North deliberately seek to prevent certain migrants' migration north.

4.4. Infrastructure at the Border Amplifies Precarity

Since 2001, states have worked with private sector actors to make massive investments in border resources, including infrastructure and walls, personnel, and surveillance. Jones (2016) claimed that instead of increasing security, the new security practices that harden borders make them more violent. Brown (2010) noted that the building of walls is a political and theatrical response to the waning sovereignty of states; states feign sovereign control over their territory by augmenting their borders.⁴ Élisabeth Vallet's extensive research on border walls found that despite the fact that they do not work, they are continually and increasingly built.

Despite the idea that globalization brought about a "borderless world" (Ohmae 1990), since 9/11, 47 border fences have built around the world. This includes 19 in Europe and the Middle East after the Arab Spring (Vallet 2018). Since 1990, members of the European Union and Schengen area (theoretically a space without border controls) built 1000 km of walls along their borders to prevent immigration (Benedicto and Brunet 2018); and one does not need to be reminded of the vitriolic debate in the United States regarding the wall with its southern neighbor. In 2015, when hundreds of thousands of Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghani refugees arrived on Europe's shores and at its borders, several states reacted by building seven fences, effectively doubling the number of walls from five to twelve in a single year (Benedicto and Brunet 2018).

The new fences built by European members influenced migratory routes but not necessarily numbers of flows. In reference to the fortification and policing of the internal and external borders of the EU in 2015, one report found that although such policies may have decreased the numbers at the end of 2015, those same migrants will find their way to Europe in the future through alternative and more dangerous routes (Inter-Agency Regional Analysts Network 2016). The (UNHCR 2019, p. 5) *Desperate Journeys* report notes that while the numbers of people crossing the Mediterranean Sea may be decreasing, the death rate increased each year from 3.1/1000 in 2015 to 19.6/1000 in 2018; and the route to Spain across the Western Mediterranean saw the death rate quadruple. After Hungary (a transit state) built fences, deployed armed forces, and criminalized irregular crossings, the flows

³ Borders practices have also been internalized, as is evident inside the US territory where local police and immigration and customs enforcement officials enforce immigration policies in homes, workplaces, and public spaces all across the country (Coleman and Kocher 2011).

⁴ Brown in Jones et al. (2017, p. 3) built upon her 2010 argument, in light of recent developments in the European Union, to look at the ways in which new walls serve to corridor flows within and between states and represent a challenge not just to national sovereignty, but also to the "postnational political institutions and political economic constellations".

were redirected through Croatia. The securitization of routes or borders with walls and fences displaces migrants to more dangerous routes, results in more irregular crossings, and fuels human smuggling networks (Cummings et al. 2015), all of which again demonstrate the ways in which policies amplify migrants' precarity. In addition to people on the move in the context of climate change being part of these flows, the "apocalyptic narratives" that persist in the public discourse depoliticize the debates and enable further securitization of borders and those who cross them (Bettini 2013).

In addition to walls and fences, the entire industry of border controls has expanded significantly. The US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) increased personnel annually from 4139 agents in 1992 to a peak of 21,444 agents in 2011, and in 2018, there were 19,555 agents (US Government 2019). The CBP budget grew from 5.9 billion to 12 billion USD from 2002 to 2013, and the President's budget requested 16.4 billion USD for CBP in addition to the 7.9 billion USD for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (US Government 2018). *Frontex*, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, has seen an even more dramatic increase than the US border budgets. The *Frontex* budget increased from 6.2 million euros in 2005 to 302 million euros in 2017; and over that same period of time, the spending on deportations as a percentage of the overall budget rose from 1.3 percent to 17.6 percent ((Benedicto and Brunet 2018), author's calculations).

But the expenditures are not just by states; government outsourcing of security functions profits private companies in the management of migration and blurs the line of legal responsibility and accountability (Bloom 2015; Doty and Wheatley 2013; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2013). For example, Meares Group, a UK housing and home care company, recently won a 1.15 billion British Pound Sterling (1.5 billion USD) contract for asylum seeker accommodations after another company had their contract cancelled because of the abhorrent living conditions of the housing complex (Corporatewatch 2019). The biometric technology industry, an integral sector in the global system of border control and surveillance, is estimated to be worth 20 to 30 billion USD by 2020 (Stenum 2017, f.n. 1). Scholars refute the effectiveness of these investments for controlling flows of people (Vallet 2018; Jones 2016), but it is clear the objective is deterrence and not protection or facilitation of movement.

Migration and border controls have changed in recent decades, with implications for migrants. These more restrictive controls have contributed to the production of "irregular" migration and have therefore put more individuals in positions of insecurity, vulnerability, and precarity. Migration policies classify people through the creation of categories. These categories determine an individual's rights to cross a border, rights which have been increasingly challenged by more restrictive migration and border regimes. These more restrictive regimes include externalizing the border beyond the boundary line and augmented border infrastructure and personnel at the border. Those displaced by climate change are implicated in all instances because they are part of the flows of migrants seeking economic opportunity or protection in states that can provide those, but insofar as we can identify those directly displaced by climate change, they are simultaneously outside any category that would provide them such protection.

5. Conclusions

This article reviewed the current statistics on international migration and displacement and explored if and how climate change will intersect and influence the movement of people. While climate change will impact the mobility of people, assuming it is an isolated driver obfuscates the complexity of migration decisions. Instead, climate change will intersect with forces that are already driving displacement and migration—economic insecurity, conflict and violence, and disasters. In this way, climate change makes the entire human population precarious—although some more so than others. As such, the article conceptualizes precarity as a condition of vulnerability produced by policies and practices enacted by border and migration controls—specifically the categorization of migrants, the spatial stretching of borders, and the augmentation of border infrastructures.

The ways in which current border and migration policies are conceptualized and implemented are ineffective for dealing with migration. They overestimate their ability to control flows, they

do not account for the complexity of migrants' journeys and motivations, and they ignore the disconnect between policies and drivers of migration including development processes and inequality. Rigid distinctions between forced versus voluntary motivations for migration are unhelpful for understanding or managing migration flows. In addition, although states need to know who is coming and going from their territory, governance of these flows has been managed to preserve the sovereign authority of the nation-state to the detriment of migrants' rights and protection. In these ways, governance regimes have amplified the precarity of migrants. Border and migration controls directly and indirectly produce or contribute to migrant vulnerabilities because they are more concerned with deterring and securing certain migrants from reaching their territory than they are interested in protecting and facilitating movement. The article refrains from claiming that climate migrants are more precarious than other migrants—indeed, the attempts to identify climate migrants are misplaced—but it does argue that “irregular” migrants, many of whose migration patterns were influenced by climate change, are more precarious. Furthermore, the complicated nexus of climate change and migration illustrates the ways in which contemporary border and migration policies are profoundly unable to protect those caught in this nexus. What remains to be seen is the degree to which states with the capacity to facilitate movement or protect people have any interest in doing so.

Insofar as climate change is increasingly influencing global flows of migration and displacement, the current migration policies of countries in the global north are not facilitating safe, orderly, and regular migration. Instead, states are creating or producing “irregular” migration through their policies rather than reducing it. This in turn amplifies the precarity of people on the move, regardless of why they are moving, as they seek to avoid detection and bypass border controls. Given the potential disruption of climate change on natural and human systems, additional empirical research on the intersections of climate change and migration, particularly in terms of long-distance international migration, is required.

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