

CLIMATE, MIGRATION, & REFUGEES – SOCI 125C
University of California – San Diego
Spring 2026



Figure 1: Edel Rodriguez's "Strangers," 2018

Mon, Wed, Fri, 12-12:50pm
COA B23

Prof. Jake Watson
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Office Hours: Mon, 1:10pm-2:30pm
Social Science Building, Room 493 (or Zoom by request)
Feel free to attend as individuals or in groups

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Climate change is anticipated to be a primary driver of human migration and displacement in years and decades to come, with many communities around the world already experiencing these effects. In this course, we will develop a critical understanding of climate change and its relationship to human migration. Rather than treating climate change as a natural or monocausal driver of migration, we explore how it interacts with existing social, economic, and political structures to shape mobility, immobility, and displacement. Climate change does not displace people in isolation—it interacts with existing, historically produced inequalities in ways that often exacerbate vulnerabilities and reinforce exclusion and control. Through case studies on disasters, border regimes, development-induced displacement, and Indigenous

climate justice, we analyze how structural inequalities determine who moves, who stays, and who benefits from existing responses. Engaging with critical environmental justice perspectives, decolonial critiques, and alternative imaginaries of climate futures, students will develop a nuanced understanding of climate-related mobility. The course culminates in a final group project where you will analyze a real-world case and propose responses that engage with and go beyond conventional policy solutions. By centering questions of power, responsibility, and justice, this course challenges you to rethink dominant framings of climate migration and to imagine more equitable futures.

READINGS

There are no required texts for this course. All readings will be made available as PDFs on Canvas or through the library. Please familiarize yourself with UCSD's physical holdings and online catalogue system. Please also sign up for free *New York Times* access. You are encouraged to acquire hard copies, but given contemporary custom, all materials assigned are available online. You may be interested in this [discussion between Ezra Klein and Maryanne Wolf](#) about reading as you make decisions throughout college about hard vs. digital texts.

COURSE STRUCTURE

We have ten weeks of classes this quarter followed by a finals week. After an opening week on “climate change basics,” the course will be organized into three parts: understanding climate migration; intersectionality and inequalities; and politics and the future. By the end of the course, you should have a strong, critical understanding of the relationship between climate change, the environment, and human mobility, as well as the complexities of predicting, governing, and addressing “climate mobilities.” Each week is organized into three sessions. The first and second will generally introduce a core concept or area of social scientific research through analysis and case studies, while the third will critically consider different “solutions” forwarded for climate migration and environmental issues. Lectures will include important material not in the readings that will be covered in assessments. Materials are listed on the day they are to be completed *before* coming to class, and they should be done in the order that they appear on the syllabus.



Figure 1: Temporary Storage: The Belongings, by Camilo Ontiveros

GRADING AND COURSE REQUIREMENTS

At the end of this course, you will receive a numerical grade out of one hundred that refers to the letter grades below. Your grade will be rounded to the closest whole number. For example, if you finish with 93.4, you will be rounded to 93 (A-). If you finish with 93.5, you will be

rounded to 94 (A). An A+ is reserved for exceptional performance. For those taking the course for P/NP, a passing grade is considered a C- or higher as per UCSD [grading guidelines](#).

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|----|-----------|
| A | 94+ |
| A- | 90 - 93.9 |
| B+ | 86 - 89.9 |
| B | 82 - 85.9 |
| B- | 78 - 81.9 |
| C+ | 74 - 77.9 |
| C | 70 - 73.9 |
| C- | 66 - 69.9 |
| D | 60 - 65.9 |
| F | 59.9 < |

Your final grade will be assessed on the following components:

25% Climate Mobilities Journal

Throughout the quarter, you will complete five journal entries responding to questions posed at the end of each week. For example, the Week 1 question is: “What is climate change? And why might issues of justice be important when studying and discussing its effects?” Each entry will be graded on a 5-point scale following a “2-2” structure and one additional point for writing quality.

- Responses (2 points): Provide two clear responses to the week’s question(s), supporting each response with specific evidence from course readings and lectures. When citing materials, include page numbers. You are welcome, though not required, to incorporate readings from previous weeks.
- Reflections or Critiques (2 points): Offer two additional reflections or critiques. These may include questions about concepts or arguments that you found unclear or challenging, critiques of specific readings, challenges to class arguments, or extensions of the week's topic to contemporary issues. This component encourages you to actively engage with the course materials and topics.

Entries should be 250–350 words. Journal entries are due between the final session of each week and 11:59 pm on the following Monday. For instance, the Week 1 entry should be submitted between 1pm on April 10th and 11:59 pm on April 13th. You can submit entries via the Assignments page on Canvas. You have eight opportunities (Weeks 1–7 and 9) to complete five journal entries; your three lowest scores will be dropped to accommodate weeks you choose not to submit entries. All students can earn full credit for each journal entry completed.

25% Midterm – May 8th, In-Class

The midterm will cover all course materials and lectures up to and including Wednesday, May 6th. There will be three question formats: multichoice, true/false, and short answer. More information will be provided closer to the time.

25% Group Project: Case Study & Climate Solutions

A key objective of this course is to equip you with the skills and knowledge necessary to understand and actively engage in public debates about climate change, migration, and environmental justice. Your final project is designed to put these skills into practice. You will work in groups of 3-4 to analyze a real-world issue related to climate change and migration, critically assessing its underlying causes and dynamics, key actors involved, socio-political impacts, and potential policy and community-based responses. While you may propose conventional policy-based solutions, you are strongly encouraged to critically examine their limitations and consider alternative approaches that prioritize equity, sustainability, and long-term justice. Your analysis must meaningfully engage with course concepts, including critiques of top-down, managerial responses and perspectives from climate, Indigenous, and environmental justice movements.

Each group will deliver an 8–10-minute presentation during the final week of class, clearly explaining the selected issue, mapping the relevant actors and power dynamics, and proposing thoughtful solutions ranging from reformist to transformative. Your analysis should demonstrate careful engagement with course materials, critically examining who benefits from existing responses and who is excluded. Audience members will rate each presentation, and the highest-rated group will receive a one percent bonus added to their final course grade. Note that this peer rating is separate from the instructor-assessed grade.

To prepare, each group must submit a one-page, double-spaced Project Brief by the end of Week 8. This brief will count for 2 points toward your overall grade and should outline your chosen topic and preliminary direction for analysis. Following the presentation, each individual student must submit a separate 2-4 page “Project Report.” This report, worth 8 points, should critically reflect on the project experience, explicitly addressing:

- What you personally learned through the project, including how your understanding of climate change and (im)mobility deepened or changed.
- The main challenges your group encountered, and the specific strategies used to overcome them.
- How your group’s analysis and proposed interventions connect to core themes and concepts discussed in the course.

Your individual Project Report is due by 11:59 pm on Sunday, June 7th, and will be assessed separately from your group’s collective grade. Additional submission details and grading criteria will be provided on Canvas.

25% Final – Wednesday, June 10th, 11:30a-2:29p in COA B23 (our regular classroom)

The final will cover all course materials and lectures. I will provide you four essay prompts and ask you to select and reply to two. These will be more analytic essays, examining your comprehension and application of course concepts and ideas. You can bring a two-sided, letter-head sized cheat sheet to the exam.

TIME BANK

Every student is given a 24-hour time bank for the quarter. You can choose how to use it – if at all. It is your responsibility to keep track of how much time you have used. Canvas tracks lateness, so you do not need to inform me independently if you use your time bank.

LATENESS POLICY

Please make sure to hand in assignments on time. Unexcused lateness will be penalized by two point for every 24 hours late. I am happy to discuss extensions when appropriate, but please reach out to arrange these *before* deadlines pass. In the interests of fairness and accountability, retroactive extensions will not be granted except under exceptional circumstances.

EXTRA CREDIT OPPORTUNITIES

You may complete a maximum of two bonus credit assignments over the course of the quarter, equaling an additional 2% on your overall grade. To take advantage of this opportunity, you will attend a climate change/migration-related talk or event on or off campus and write a one-page reflection memo about it drawing on concepts and material from class. Memos must be submitted to Canvas no later than 3 days after the event. They will be graded on a fail (0), check (0.5%), check-plus (1%) basis for a maximum of one percent of your total grade. This will be applied to your record at the end of the quarter. I will periodically post relevant events, but if you see something interesting, feel free to reach out and check its eligibility. At all events, please be respectful of the speaker and audience.

STATEMENT ON USAGE OF GENERATIVE AI

Generative AI tools such as Chat-GPT are transforming higher education. My view is that GenAI can short-circuit important stages of the learning process to detrimental effects. Across the sciences and humanities, the *process* of our learning (i.e., critical reading, thinking, and communication skills) is at least as important as the information we are learning and creating. We can use GenAI to get at the latter, but often at the expense of the former. It is through grappling with concepts and ideas, assessing their relative value, debating them with our peers, and formulating our own thoughts in relation to them through research, writing, and speaking that we develop the habits of mind critical for active participation in democratic societies.

At the same time, I recognize that GenAI can be a valuable tool and that many of you will enter careers after college where you will interface with it frequently. Given this, it is important to learn how to use these tools in intentional, reflective, and transparent ways. As such, I permit the use of GenAI in this course with important considerations and stipulations:

1. AI should not be relied on for reading. Read materials, take notes, and think critically about them *before* turning to AI to aid comprehension (if you do this at all).
2. You are not allowed to use GenAI to conduct primary writing. If you use GenAI for writing at all, it should be restricted to editing. Indeed, AI can be useful for this, but it should not be used to shortcut the process of learning that occurs through writing.
3. Using AI to complete coursework without proper attribution is a form of academic dishonesty that may violate UCSD's honor code. Original ideas taken from AI output (even if modified) **must be cited** and are not considered your own original work. Failure to appropriately cite AI will result in your submission to the honors council.

WRITING SUPPORT

Professional and academic writing is a skill that requires practice and training. I encourage you to take advantage of the wonderful writing support resources offered on campus. UCSD's [Writing Hub](#), for example, offers free one-on-one consultation on papers and assignments.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Life happens. If you find yourself in a difficult situation such as the loss of a family member, grave illness, or a mental health crisis, please let me know. I might be able to accommodate your specific circumstances and/or direct you to appropriate campus resources.

Note that in the case of sexual assault, I am obligated to report the incident to our Title IX Coordinator who is responsible for overseeing investigations of sexual misconduct. For confidential support, please contact The Office for the Prevention of Harassment & Discrimination directly: ophd@ucsd.edu.

WEEK 1: Introduction

Mon 03/30 – Course Intro

- No Reading

Wed 04/01 – **NO CLASS** – Sinking: A Film Introduction

- Watch Anote's Ark by Matthieu Rytz (71 mins)
- Consider: What is driving the displacement facing Kiribati? Who is responsible — and who is being asked to bear the costs? What does “climate migration” look like from inside the experience of those facing it?

Fri 04/03 – What is climate change?

- Joanne Nagel. 2016. “What is Global Climate Change?” In; *Gender and Climate Change*, Routledge Press

Week 1 Journal Question: What is climate change? And why might issues of *inequality* and *justice* be important when studying and discussing its effects?

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING “CLIMATE MIGRATION”

WEEK 2: Climate Migration

Mon 04/06 – Climate Migration: Crisis Narratives & Common Myths

- Abrahm Lustgarten. (2020). The Great Climate Migration: Part I. *New York Times & Pro Publica* (5 pgs.)
- Gemenne, F. (2011). Why the Numbers Don't Add Up. *Global Environmental Change*, 21, S41-S49. (9 pgs.)
- Boas, I. et al. (2019). Climate Migration Myths. *Nature Climate* (3 pgs.)

Wed 04/08 – Climate Migration & Adaptation

- Black, R., Bennett, S. R., Thomas, S. M., & Beddington, J. R. (2011). Migration as Adaptation. *Nature*, 478(7370), 447-449 (2 pgs.)
- Castro & Sen. 2022. “Everyday Adaptation: Theorizing Climate Change Adaptation in Daily Life.” *Global Environmental Change* 75(1): 102555 (8 pgs.)

Fri 04/10 – A Case Study: Sea-Level Rise & Migration

- Hauer, M. E., Fussell, et. al (2020). Sea-Level Rise and Human Migration. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 1(1), 28-39 (10 pgs.)

Week 2 Journal Question: What factors might prominent narratives of a coming “great climate migration” be missing? Why is it hard to measure effects of climate change on human mobility? Why do either of these things matter?

WEEK 3: Immobility

Mon 04/13 – Why People Stay

- Caroline Zickgraf. 2021. Theorizing (Im)Mobility in the Face of Environmental Change. *Regional Environmental Change* 21: 126 (11 pgs.)

Wed 04/15 – Trapped Populations

- Nawrotzki, R. J., & DeWaard, J. (2018). Putting Trapped Populations into Place: Climate Change and Inter-District Migration Flows in Zambia. *Regional Environmental Change*, 18(2), 533–546 (13 pgs.)

Fri 04/17 – Voluntary Immobility

- Listen: [Can Small Islands Live with Climate Change?](#) *BBC Podcast: The Climate Question*, 08/20/2023 (20 mins)
- Farbotko, C. 2018. “Voluntary Immobility: Indigenous Voices in the Pacific.” *Forced Migration Review*, no. 57. (3 pgs.)

Week 3 Journal Question: What does it mean to stay in place in the face of climate change—and who gets to choose?

WEEK 4: Borders & Displacement

Mon 04/20 – Complex Humanitarian Crises

- Solano, P., & Massey, D. S. (2022). Migrating through the Corridor of Death: The Making of a Complex Humanitarian Crisis. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 10(3), 147-172.

Wed 04/22 – Climate, Borders, and the Weaponization of Nature

- Campbell-Staton, S. C., et al. (2021). Physiological Costs of Undocumented Human Migration. *Science*, 374(6574), 1496-1500 (4 pgs.)
- The Intercept. (2019). [Climate Change, Migration, and Militarization in Arizona's Borderlands](#) (5 pgs.)
- Optional Read: Fred Pierce. (2022). [Fenced In: How the Global Rise of Border Walls Is Stifling Wildlife](#). Yale360 (4 pgs.)

Fri 04/24 – Documenting & Addressing Climate Mobility on the US/Mexico Border

- International Refugee Assistance Program. (2024). [Enduring Change: A Data Review of Firsthand Accounts of Climate Mobility Impacts](#). Research Brief, Fall 2024; **NOTE:** Pick some case studies from the end of the report that you find compelling.
- Christopher Flavelle. 2025. [U.S. Aid Agency's Climate Programs Aimed to Curb Migration. Now They're Gone](#). *New York Times*, February 8, 2025

Week 4 Journal Question: What role does climate change play in driving human mobility? How should policies respond to these drivers?

PART 2: INEQUALITIES, ENVIRONMENT, MIGRATION

WEEK 5: (Un)Natural Disasters

Mon 04/27 – Denaturalizing Disasters

- Listen: Floodlines: The story of an Unnatural Disaster, Episode I (“Antediluvian”), II (“Come Sunday”), V (“Exodus”), & VI (“Reckoning”)
- Optional Read: Mike Davis on SoCal Wildfires, *LRB*

Wed 04/29 – Uneven Returns

- Elizabeth Fussel et al. (2010). “Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Return Migration to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.” *Population & Environment*, 31(1-3):20-42
- Optional Watch: [Katrina Babies](#), HBO Max

Fri 05/01 – Uneven Recovery

- Naomi Klein. 2017. [How Power Profits from Disaster](#). *The Guardian* (5 pgs.)
- Watch: Naomi Klein. 2019. [The Battle Over Paradise](#). *The Intercept* (16 mins)
- Rebecca Solnit. 2015. [In the Shadow of the Storm](#). Harper’s Magazine (3 pgs.)

Week 5 Journal Question: What social factors shape the experiences and long-term outcomes of disasters, and how do inequalities affect recovery and rebuilding?

WEEK 6: Climate Migration, Development, & Agrarian Futures

Mon 05/04 – Climate Migration or Labor Migration?

- Dewan, C. (2023). Climate Refugees or Labour Migrants? *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 50(6), 2339–2360. (7 pgs.)
- Paprocki, Kasia. (2022). “Anticipatory Ruination.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 49 (7): 1399–1408 (7 pgs.)

Wed 05/06 – Midterm Review & Short Movie Reflection

- In-Class Movie: [See What Three Degrees of Global Warming Looks Like](#), The Economist

- Please come prepared with questions about concepts, ideas, and readings.

Fri 05/08 – In-Class Midterm

Week 6 Journal Question: How do we distinguish labor migration from climate-related migration? Why might these distinctions matter politically, and what are the implications for policies addressing displacement?

WEEK 7: Indigenous Displacement

Mon 05/11 – Displaced & Dispossessed... Again

- Justin Farrell et al. 2021. Effects of land dispossession and forced migration on Indigenous peoples in North America. *Science*. 374(6567):eabe4943.
- Christopher Flavelle & Karen Goodluck. [Dispossessed, Again: Climate Change Hits Native Americans Especially Hard](#). *New York Times*, June 27, 2021

Wed 05/13 – Indigenous Mobility

- Whyte, K., L Talley, J., & D. Gibson, J. (2019). Indigenous Mobility Traditions, Colonialism, and the Anthropocene. *Mobilities*, 14(3), 319-335.

Fri 05/15 – Indigenous Climate Justice

- Amali Tower & Moriah Prescia: [Who is Accountable When Climate Change Displaces Indigenous People?](#) Climate Refugees Weekend Feature, July 8, 2021 (4 pgs.)
- Listen: [Indigenous stewardship helps climate change efforts](#), KPBS Radio, June 2023

Week 7 Journal Question: Why are Indigenous populations often more impacted by climate change? What should be done about this and by whom?

PART 3: POLITICS, GOVERNANCE, FUTURES

WEEK 8: Retreat & Relocation

Mon 05/18 - Loss & Damage

- UN Environmental Program – [What is Loss & Damage?](#) (1 pg.)
- Elliott, Rebecca. 2018. The Sociology of Climate Change as a Sociology of Loss. *European Journal of Sociology* 59(3): 301-337.

Wed 05/20 – Retreat & Resettlement

- Koslov, Liz. 2016. The Case for Retreat. *Public Culture* 28(2): 359-387

*** Note:** If you are short on time, focus on pages 359-369 and 374-381.

- Jim Elliot & Jay Wang. 2023. [When homes flood, who gets FEMA buyouts and where do they go? We mapped thousands of moves and found distance and race both play a role.](#) *The Conversation*. June 15, 2024

Fri 05/22 – Presentation Planning (No Class)

- Meet to plan and prepare your group presentations. Your “Project Brief” is due Sunday. Submit a picture of your meeting.

NO ENTRY DUE

WEEK 9: Climate Refugees

Mon 05/25 – Memorial Day (No Class)

- Happy memorial day!

Wed 05/27 – Climate Refugees

- Rebecca Hamlin. 2022. [‘Migrants’? ‘Refugees’? Terminology Is Contested, Powerful, and Evolving.](#) *Migration Policy Institute Report* (4 pgs.)
- Matt Giles. 2023. [Should Climate Refugees Be Recognized as Such?](#) Earth.org (4 pgs.)
- Explainer: [Cruz Galicia v. Garland on Climate-Related Asylum.](#) *Center for Gender and Refugee Studies*, July 18, 2024 (4 pgs.)

Fri 05/29 – Debating Climate Refugees

- Bettini, G. (2013). Climate barbarians at the gate? A critique of apocalyptic narratives on ‘climate refugees’. *Geoforum*, 45, 63-72.
- Listen: [Climate Change Oppression: A Podcast with Amali Tower](#), *The Border Chronicle* (1h)

Week 9 Journal Question: What are the political and legal stakes of creating 'climate refugees' as a distinct category?

WEEK 10: Group Presentations & Wrapping Up

Mon & Wed & Fri – Presentations & Wrapping Up

===== END OF CLASSES, JUNE 5 =====

ACADEMIC CODE

Students are expected to exhibit the highest standards of academic integrity and never to submit work as their own which is the work of others – including AI models. Students should familiarize themselves with the UCSD's Academic Integrity Policy: <https://senate.ucsd.edu/Operating-Procedures/Senate-Manual/Appendices/2>. Academic misconduct is the misrepresentation of one's academic achievement and includes cheating on examinations, falsely indicating your own or another's attendance in class, and plagiarizing written work. Failing to properly acknowledge and cite sources of information in a paper or presenting another person's words or ideas as if they were your own constitutes plagiarism. All cases that violate UCSD's rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including but not limited to failure in the course.

A NOTE ABOUT CONTENT

This course may challenge each of our assumptions and raise questions that we have differing opinions on from one another. We will discuss sensitive topics with multiple personal and political dimensions, and diverse opinions and academic dispute are expected and welcome. You are expected to participate in all debates with respect for your classmates and instructor. Though personal opinions may differ, you will be graded only according to whether you learned the concepts taught in this course. I will never grade based on your political opinions or conclusions – only whether you support your arguments and conclusions with good, social scientific reasoning and evidence.

Challenges to our basic assumptions can feel uncomfortable, and the possibility of feeling distressed is magnified when the topics being studied are so deeply connected to the ways we understand ourselves and/or when they concern core aspects of our identities. If you are concerned, feel free to talk with me during office hours. Counselors are always available to students at the university's Counselling Center. You can make appointments through [MyStudentChart](#) or by calling (858) 534-3755.

I look forward to a challenging and stimulating quarter!