Rebuild or Retreat? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Climate Migration and Mobility in the Global North

Workshop held at the German Historical Institute Washington, April 23–24, 2026. Conveners: Jana Dunz-Keck (GHI Washington), Sarah Beringer (GHI Washington), Simon Richter (University of Pennsylvania), Andreas Huebner (University of Kiel), Max Gruenig (POCACITO Network / Georgetown University, BMW Center for German and European Studies), and Brendan O'Donnell (POCACITO Network / Heinrich Böll Foundation). Participants: Illya Azaroff (American Institute of Architects), Vidya Balasubramanyam (Coastal States Organization), Hélène Benveniste (Stanford University), William D. Buckingham (Institute for Public Ethnomusicology), Dagomar Degroot (Georgetown University), Nepomuk Dunz (World Bank), Wiwandari Handayani (Diponegoro University), Felicitas Hillmann (Technical University Berlin), Bruce Holsinger (University of Virginia), Andy Horowitz (University of Connecticut), Rizqa Hidayani (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Lindsay Jenkins (Georgetown University), Justin Ángel Knighten (The George Washington University Alliance for a Sustainable Future), Patrick Nederkoorn, Kayly Ober (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), Jacqui Patterson (The Chisholm Legacy Project), Kira Vinke (German Council on Foreign Relations, Center for Climate and Foreign Policy), Koko Warner (IOM Global Data Institute), Claudia Wolff (University of Kiel), and Robert S. Young (Western Carolina University).

This international workshop set out to explore a central question in the age of climate change: who rebuilds, who retreats, and under what conditions? Bringing together scholars and

practitioners from different fields, it examined how contemporary debates about climate migration, adaptation, and managed retreat can be placed in dialogue with longer historical perspectives. While the workshop primarily focused on the Global North, it also included case studies from the Global South in order to highlight both the global dimension of climate migration and the highly local challenges through which it is experienced, negotiated, and governed.

Bruce Holsinger's opening keynote, "The Fiction of Managed Retreat," set the tone by approaching retreat not primarily as a policy problem but as an imaginative, emotional, and ethical one. Drawing on his 2022 novel *The Displacements*, Holsinger reflected on what fiction can reveal about climate mobility, loss, and displacement that bureaucratic language often cannot. Centering on a wealthy family who become internally displaced by catastrophe, the novel challenges the assumption that climate change affects only poor populations or the Global South while showing how privilege shapes the experiences of "temporary relocation," rebuilding, and loss. Managed retreat, Holsinger argued, requires imagining the end of a place before that end has fully arrived, and it is precisely this anticipation of future loss that produces resistance. Fiction can make visible the affective dimensions of retreat, confusion, dependency, grief, and disorientation, in ways policy frameworks cannot. His discussion of the novel's fictional web archive of oral histories from survivors of a Category 6 hurricane also raised a question that resonated throughout the conference: what archives of climate change and climate displacement will remain for future historians, and which stories will be lost?

The first panel, "Voices from the Ground: Lived Experience, Heritage, and Displacement," shifted attention to communities already living with environmental stress. Wiwandari Handayani's case study of coastal sinking cities on the northern coast of Java traced the interwoven effects of sea-level rise,

flooding, land subsidence, and social inequality. Her research underscored how climate change disproportionately affects economically disadvantaged groups and especially women, many of whom remain responsible for households and local livelihoods while men migrate temporarily for work. Yet immobility, she showed, is often not simply a choice but the outcome of limited resources, social ties, and uncertainty elsewhere. Claudia Wolff's comparative study of managed retreat initiatives in Europe similarly emphasized that retreat is rarely a straightforward relocation process. Instead, it tends to be fragmented and reactive, shaped by compensation, governance, timing, trust, and the degree of community involvement. Together, the papers highlighted that adaptation is highly context-specific and that retreat is best understood as a broader social and spatial transformation rather than a merely logistical exercise.

Panel II, "Governing Climate Mobility: Law, Policy, and Political Responsibility," examined the unequal capacities that determine who is able to move, who is forced to stay, and who can recover. Hélène Benveniste argued that mobility and immobility are two sides of the same coin, both structured by unevenly distributed resources and institutional capacity. Her findings suggested that climate change may deepen immobility for the poorest populations, including those effectively trapped in high-risk environments. Kira Vinke emphasized the growing gap between scientific recognition of climate migration and much slower policy responses. Drawing on both the Ahr Valley flood in Germany and case studies from Burkina Faso, she showed that climate shocks interact unevenly with social vulnerability and that habitability under climate change depends on unequal levels of resilience, insurance, and state support. Koko Warner, in turn, explored rebuilding and retreat through the lens of financial instruments. From the Dust Bowl to Hurricane Katrina, she demonstrated that decisions to stay or move are shaped not only by environmental exposure

but also by access to credit, insurance, and household resources. As private insurers increasingly withdraw from high-risk areas, she argued, the growing role of public programs raises pressing questions about governance, responsibility, and long-term capacity.

The third panel, "Mapping Climate Retreat: Geographies of Risk and Relocation," sharpened the conference's comparative and political-economic dimensions. Felicitas Hillmann asked what can be learned from environmental resettlement and relocation concepts in the Global South, comparing examples from Indonesia and Germany. She stressed that migration should be understood as a social normality rather than an exception and cautioned against understanding climate mobility as triggered by sea-level rise alone. Her case studies on Indonesia revealed how communities respond to chronic flooding through a range of in situ adaptation strategies, including raising houses, planting mangroves, gardening, recycling, and community-led improvements, often driven by women and NGOs. At the same time, she highlighted the psychological burden of slow environmental decline and contrasted it with the sudden displacement caused by the 2021 Ahr Valley flood, where bureaucracy complicated access to recovery funds despite large-scale public support. Robert S. Young's presentation on "oceanfront retreat in the USA" offered a stark critique of American coastal adaptation. Rather than pursuing coherent long-term retreat, he argued, the United States continues to subsidize highly unequal and often irrational forms of protection, from beach nourishment to rebuilding in speculative coastal investment zones. His cases from Florida, New Jersey, North Carolina, and South Carolina showed how adaptation funding frequently follows property value and investor interests rather than vulnerability, while buyout programs remain marginal. Together, the panel underscored that retreat is shaped by ownership, infrastructure, race, and political economy.

The session "Making Climate Comedy" opened another perspective on public engagement by asking how the humanities and arts can communicate climate migration to broader audiences. Simon Richter discussed his animated *Poldergeist* project, which translates climate history and adaptation debates into accessible visual narratives, particularly for Dutch audiences facing questions of retreat and sea-level rise. Patrick Nederkoorn reflected on using comedy to confront audiences with their own possible futures as climate migrants in shows such as *Der fliehende Holländer* [The Fleeing Dutchman] and *Die Orangene Gefahr* [The Orange Hazard]. In these performances, he addresses audiences in the Netherlands about their own possible futures as climate refugees, while also engaging audiences in neighboring Germany with the prospect of future "floods" of Dutch and hence "orange" climate migrants. Performing in both the Netherlands and Germany, and in cities as well as smaller towns and villages, Nederkoorn is in contact with highly diverse audiences across different segments of the political and social spectrum. His work also addresses the specific legacy of Dutch colonialism by playing with the audience's potential racial bias, for example by referring to the show's pianist as Indonesian and pointing out that his large family, too, may be forced to seek refuge because of rising sea levels in the not-so-distant future. Together, Richter's and Nederkoorn's contributions suggested that humor and creative media can make difficult and unsettling questions publicly discussable in ways that conventional academic or policy formats often cannot.

Panel IV, "Lessons Learned? Historical and Cultural Perspectives on Climate Migration," returned to longer historical and cultural perspectives. Andy Horowitz examined post-Katrina New Orleans as a case that exposed the political and ethical tensions between rebuilding and retreat. Plans to shrink the city after the storm disproportionately affected predominantly Black neighborhoods met with fierce resistance from local activists defending residents' right to return. Yet the

broader rebuilding that followed did not resolve the underlying tension between the right to return and long-term safety, leaving many communities exposed to future risk. William D. Buckingham offered another case study from Louisiana, this time from coastal communities not far from New Orleans, to highlight a different dimension of climate change: the erosion of cultural life and memory. Focusing on Isleños communities, descendants of Canary Islanders, he argued that environmental degradation and displacement threaten not only livelihoods but also intangible cultural heritage, including language, music, and oral tradition. As part of his involvement in creating a digital archive of songs and oral histories, Buckingham showed how cultural preservation can itself become a form of resilience and political intervention. At the same time, this archive makes it possible to teach and learn from the largely lost history of the Isleños, many of whom were ultimately forced to leave because of climate change.

The conference's final sessions focused more explicitly on outreach, pedagogy, and collaboration. In "Creative Scenarios and Solutions: Designing Adaptive Futures," Dagomar Degroot presented *The Climate Chronicles*, a public-facing platform that combines lectures, videos, teaching materials, and a glossary to make climate history accessible to a broader audience. Drawing on both natural and societal archives, including weather observations and ship logs, Degroot showed how climate history can bridge scientific and humanistic inquiry. The breakout session, facilitated by Jana Dunz-Keck and Sarah Beringer, translated the conference's discussions into more concrete terms. Participants identified research gaps, methodological challenges, and possible collaborative activities, while stressing the need for stronger interdisciplinary exchange, clearer shared vocabularies, and greater attention to inequality, place attachment, and public-facing scholarship. They also used the session to discuss concrete next steps, including which interviews with climate migrants they hoped to conduct next and which kinds

of empirical data still need to be created in order to advance the field.

The closing panel, "Where Do We Go From Here? Research, Policy, and Publics," brought these themes back to questions of practice. Jacqui Patterson drew on her work with frontline communities of color to show how disaster response and buyout programs in the United States can be weaponized against vulnerable populations when residents are excluded from meaningful decision-making. Justin Ángel Knighten highlighted the difficulty of effective disaster response in the face of competing governmental priorities and the disproportionate vulnerability of elderly, low-income, and Indigenous communities. The discussion made clear that climate mobility cannot be addressed through technical planning alone. It requires sustained attention to justice, participation, and the unequal distribution of risk and resources.

Across all panels, the conference demonstrated that climate migration and managed retreat are not simply environmental or policy problems, but also historical, cultural, and ethical ones. Speakers repeatedly showed that decisions to stay, move, rebuild, or retreat are shaped by social inequality, attachment to place, political power, and the stories societies tell about risk, belonging, and the future. The conference thus made a compelling case for combining empirical research with public engagement and for treating climate mobility not as an exceptional crisis at the margins, but as a central question for understanding the present and future of the Global North.

Oleg Arbatski, Sarah Beringer, and Jana Dunz-Keck
(GHI Washington)