



## Statement of Current and Future Research

### OVERVIEW:

As an environmental humanities scholar, I approach environmental studies primarily through American literature and popular culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. I study the impacts of climate change, international development, and militarization on social and environmental justice. My dissertation, “War by Other Means: Environmental Violence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” investigates how natural environments are weaponized against people of color and the poor in modern armed conflict, and how contemporary fiction illuminates and protests these hitherto hidden forms of violence. I am the co-editor of an anthology: *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities* (2017) with Stephanie LeMenager and Stephen Siperstein, and my work on teaching climate change through creative writing has been published in *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* (2015).

### CURRENT RESEARCH:

“War by Other Means” studies how theories of “counterinsurgency warfare” have grown increasingly important both for U.S. military operations and U.S. public conceptions of the environment’s relation to war and national security. I read the logics of counterinsurgency within a broad archive of American literature, popular culture, and government policy documents generated from the end of the Cold War to the present. The project consists of four body chapters.

The first chapter identifies the theoretical concept of an “ecology of violence,” using the Guatemalan civil war as a historical case-study wherein the Guatemalan military and government (an often meaningless distinction) enacted theories and practices of counterinsurgency to effect spectacular, eruptive violence as well as to use this violence to secure slow, inscrutable environmental harm. The effect of both tactics served one genocidal and political strategy. I read this ecology of violence through Héctor Tobar’s novel, *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998) and through the ethnographic interviews of actual Guatemalan military officers conducted by Jennifer Schirmer. An early version of this chapter has been reviewed and invited for revision and resubmission to *MELUS*, the journal of the Society of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States.

In the second chapter, I apply a similar approach to the “ecologies of violence” of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands. Often overlooked as a site of active conflict, I argue that the increasing militarization of the Borderlands has been a quiet armed conflict fought through weapons of environmental warfare against undocumented migrants. This is not a metaphorical war, but one that has claimed between 5,000-10,000 lives since the start of “Operation Gatekeeper” and its policy offspring. In my view, one reason that this conflict has remained peripheral to discussions of militarism is the way in which the weaponization of the U.S.-Mexico border environments has naturalized human violence and obscured it. I read Luís Alberto Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway* (2004) as conducting a form a “narrative political ecology.” That is, *The Devil’s Highway* does the transdisciplinary work of political ecology — investigating how history and power relations forge environmental and social landscapes — through the art of story telling. This chapter also considers how the humanitarian work of humanitarian The Border Angels and the “tactical media” firestorm caused by the Electronic Disturbance Theater/b.a.n.g. lab’s “Transborder Immigrant Tool” captures the fugitive human agency that undergirds and directs Borderlands militarization.

The third chapter turns to potential future wars and conflicts that may be caused by climate change as they have been depicted in speculative fiction. It argues that while futurist speculative fiction remains a

### ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES PROGRAM

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rich site of environmentalist jeremiad and epideictic rhetoric, this archive often naturalizes imperialism, and an innately violent and atomistic sense of human nature to arouse environmentalist sympathy. In novels depicting internal climate migrants, such as Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Edan Lepucki's *California* (2014), I show that even politically progressive, intersectional approaches to environmental endangerment naturalize conflict and occlude dialogic solutions to environmental change. I read Matt Johnson's *Pym* (2011) as a rejoinder to such novels, contending that this humorous, extended allegory of climate justice offers a more fertile imaginative space in which to apprehend forces of racism and imperialism that drive environmental conflict.

The fourth chapter traces how the environmental refugee has become a paradigmatic figure in climate change political discourse, particularly the aspects of this discourse where issues of national security and apocalyptic change are articulated. Taking Robert Marzac's recent articulation of the "ecological security state" as a foundation for understanding counterinsurgency's role in modern climate adaptation strategies, I read two of the "founding texts" of modern U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine, David Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (1964) and the *U.S. Army Field Manual of Counterinsurgency* (2006) as instrumental in forming what Andrew Baldwin calls the "warlike posture" with which the public is encouraged to confront the "destabilizing" figure of the climate migrant. I read the 2009 documentary, *Climate Refugees*, alongside Christian Parenti's *Tropic of Chaos* (2011) to show how the "human face" of climate change is viewed through the eyes of U.S. counterinsurgency.

Beyond my work in environmental militarism and climate migration I view myself as a scholar working in the environmental humanities with deep engagements with 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century African American and Latinx literature, speculative fiction, and environmental policy and ethics. I will publish "An Interview with Héctor Tobar" in the forthcoming anthology, *Latina/o Environmentalisms: Literary Histories and Critical Theories*.

In addition to my past research publications in climate change pedagogy, I plan to continue using my own classrooms and my institution's teaching culture as a space for scholarship. I integrate research into the classroom by engaging my students as participants in pedagogical research. I also look forward to collaborating with both undergraduate and graduate students to engage in public humanities projects and conduct research around climate migration and my next book project.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

My next book project builds off my work on environmental migrants by more fully considering the history and the discursive articulation of these figures within environmentalism and popular culture. I study how this character has emerged from concern with overpopulation and the "green" nativist roots of U.S. environmentalism. After charting this history, I explicate how climate-induced migration is constructed within current mainstream environmentalism as an event of cultural extinction. I juxtapose this discourse, epitomized by Jimmy Nelson's "Before They Pass Away" photography series, with alternative articulations of climate migration as a strategy of survivance and resilience in the face of postcolonial forces. I find these articulations within the art, literature, and testimony of those migrating as a response to climate change within the U.S.; groups like Re-Locate Kivalina, a multi-scalar activist and art group from the Native Alaskan community of Kivalina, artists from another Alaskan community, Shishmaref, and the civil society groups that formed in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Sandy.