

VoicesOnTheMove_EP05 Transcript

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Will Greaves: The climate crisis is here. Climate related disasters are getting worse year over year.

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Michele: We need to get kicked out of denial, that's for sure.

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Sophia Burton (Host): The Global North is not usually the first region that comes to mind when we think of the direct impacts of climate change. We imagine severe droughts in African savannahs, massive floods sweeping through Southeast Asian villages. But in this double feature episode, we'll hear stories from Canadians who have experienced the life altering effects of natural disasters and displacement, firsthand and right at their doorsteps.

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Michele: The brown smoke is mostly what I remember, how thick the smoke was when we were trying to get out, and how I kept thinking, 'once you've made a decision, you're committed'. And so there was this sense of stepping off into nothingness.

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Sophia Burton (Host): As climate disasters become ever more frequent and destructive globally, it becomes imperative for all of us to evolve our understanding of what climate change really means for our lives and for our homes. How can we, in the Global North, transform our theoretical awareness of climate change and the potential threat of displacement into proactive, political, and practical action? That is what we're here to explore today. I'm Sophia Burton from Migration Matters, and you are listening to Voices on the Move. This episode is a collaboration between York University and Migration Matters.

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Sophia Burton (Host): On June 30th, 2021, a wildfire that had been raging for days in the Canadian province of British Columbia reached the small town of Lytton. It took just 30 minutes for most of the town's buildings and infrastructure to be burnt to the ground.

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Michele: As it happened, we were all in our houses, so within 15-20 minutes people were banging on doors and there was a collective movement making sure that everyone was accounted for. It's such a small town, and there were lots of people that either didn't have vehicles, or didn't have reliable vehicles, or were elderly.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Michelle, a former town resident of Lytton, had only minutes to escape from her home after realizing the fire was practically on her doorstep.

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Michele: I packed my husband's memorial album, a couple of statues that are one of a kind. And the weirdest thing? A fridge magnet that I treasured. Like a fridge magnet. Nuts. But anyhow, so I put those in a box and then I packed a bag. And this is a pro tip: pack good stuff. I packed the worst. I packed the ugliest bras and pants that didn't really fit because I thought, I'm not going to use these. Threw it in the car, grabbed the dog, and I turned the truck around and went to get my neighbor.

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Michele: It was a part of my brain that was registering that the embers were falling, that the fire was in town. And I knew in the back of my head somewhere that Lytton was gone.

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Sophia Burton (Host): The day before the fire reached Lytton, was the hottest day ever recorded in Canada, with temperatures reaching 49.6°C. Most Canadians would never have experienced that kind of heat before the summer of 2021.

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Yvonne Su: The important point was that many people thought this would never happen to me.

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Sophia Burton (Host): The voice you're hearing is that of Dr. Yvonne Su. Dr. Yvonne Su is an assistant professor at York University and the director of the Centre for Refugee Studies. Her research focuses on forced displacement, climate induced displacement, and queer migration.

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Yvonne Su: Because we're so used to seeing these videos in Australia, perhaps in Greece, in different parts of Africa and Asia, other places, but we don't get to turn the lens on ourselves. So for a lot of Canadians to see their fellow Canadians escaping a wildfire, consuming them on the road, um, was a wake up call. And it really brought home the idea that disasters take place in Canada. Evacuations take place in Canada, and Canadians do indeed get displaced, need to be relocated in Canada.

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Sophia Burton (Host): You are listening to Voices on the Move, a podcast on how climate changes migration.

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Will Greaves: There's a kind of conceptual or cognitive barrier where I think it becomes too frightening for many people, who are used to thinking of themselves as safe, and are used to thinking of their governments as capable, and would simply like to believe that these challenges, even if they exist, only exist for other people living in other places.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Our second expert is Dr. Will Greaves, an associate professor of international relations at the University of Victoria, focusing on climate change and security in Canada. In British Columbia, particularly in the area of Lytton, there have always been wildfires in the surrounding forests, so people there knew that flames could one day reach their streets. However, the scale of the disaster in 2021 surpassed what most people could ever have imagined. Despite the extreme heat in the days leading up to the fire, regional authorities found themselves unprepared for the severity of the blaze.

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Michele: I'm sure people describe similar things if a bomb falls or an earthquake or something, because you look out for the collective. And there were, I would say, 6 to 8 feet high on either side of my truck with flames and smoke, and it was so dense. And all I could think of is, I'm not letting the fire chase me. And it was terrifying because there was zero visibility. I knew there was a vehicle in front of me, I knew someone was following me. It turned out to be my, my friend and neighbor, and I was so afraid to go. I wanted to, you know, drive very quickly, but I knew I couldn't because I'd ram the person ahead of me. They couldn't tell, but I was also afraid I was going to get rammed by the person behind me. So we just crept along.

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Yvonne Su: British Columbia authorities didn't order evacuations from Lytton in time. As a result, people had to escape rather than be evacuated.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Michele drove for hours to the nearest safe town, edging slowly along the single road out of Lytton, surrounded by flames on three sides. She called on friends to help her find a place to stay.

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Michele: We didn't really have any idea about emergency services at that point. I kind of knew that there would be something, somewhere, but I don't know if I was going to be qualified. So I was just flinging the old credit card around. Um, and I got booked for two weeks at the hotel in Chilliwack.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Michelle, like most Lytton residents in the weeks after the fire, hopped from temporary accommodation to temporary accommodation. In her research, Yvonne Su studied both the immediate and more long term challenges faced by the people whose homes were destroyed in the disaster.

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Yvonne Su: Of course, right after the disaster, there are emergency services, right? That came and they try to provide assistance, put out the fire, you know, put people in homes, help them gather any belongings that might have remained. There's all that

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emergency stuff that takes place, but we don't have the words to describe what happens after that emergency phase.

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Michele: There was talk about interim housing, and so I sold my truck and bought this little RV, and ended up ultimately taking it to a place where they were letting us camp for free for a good chunk of the summer. And then it was becoming increasingly apparent that there was no external rescue coming.

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Yvonne Su: People need support. And who do they get it from? Do they get it from the government that they left, the municipality that they left? Do they get it from their host communities? Do they get it from the province? Do they get it federally? People don't know. Everything has a big question mark around it, and that causes a significant amount of unnecessary stress on people.

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Will Greaves: Regional and municipal governments are on the frontline of the climate crisis because despite being a global phenomenon that presents global challenges, climate change manifests at the local level. The kind of logistical difficulties of delivering on the reconstruction are very real, which make it slow, which make it expensive, and which also complicate some of the political calculations about what should be done.

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Yvonne Su: You've lost your home, and that's very damaging. But you also do not know when you can return, and you don't know when you can rebuild, and you don't know what you can build.

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Sophia Burton (Host): As weeks turned into months, Michele and other evacuees found themselves living in a trailer park, waiting for information about when they could return to Lytton to begin the process of rebuilding their homes.

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Michele: Again, it's a little circle of hell because it was a campground full of evacuees, who were quietly, not in any way intrusive, but just quietly, despairingly drinking themselves to death. And a couple people have since died.

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Sophia Burton (Host): With no emergency assistance and the local infrastructure destroyed, the residents of Lytton had no choice but to rely on their own resources, and find ways to support themselves amid the crisis.

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Michele: Friends and family. That is the main support. Beyond that, it's sheer luck. You get out with what you've got, and if you've got enough, or you can figure out how to get it, then, then, you know, you will... yeah. And if you don't, it's the kindness of

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strangers. And I thought, well, okay, it's time for you to look after yourself. And that's when I contacted my financial advisor and said, what can I afford? Again, I'm privileged because I have a, you know, my credit is good that I was able to do that. And I found a house, carried on from there. So that's my life after the fire in a nutshell.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Some, like Michele, were fortunate enough to be able to find and afford a new home elsewhere. However, many others continue to face uncertainty, remaining in limbo long after the fire.

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Yvonne Su: There's definitely this idea that you can quickly recover through a variety of mechanisms, whether it's the government, or insurance, or your own force of will. But it's been two and a half years and they are still not back. So they're not evacuees in the sense of a very short term displacement and a return. It has been years, and it will be projected to take at least a decade to rebuild.

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Michele: Well, I know people that want to rebuild that are trying to rebuild, but we're not at that stage. It's been so screwed up from minute one that, um, people don't even have their debris cleared yet. So I know someone who jokes that the blueprints that she got from the builder might just end up being wall art.

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Yvonne Su: The Lytton, B.C. community members have gone back and they have protested and they've said, we want to come back. But policy wise, there's not much they can do.

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Will Greaves: So there's a vulnerability of having such a reliance on the local infrastructure to respond to these disasters, because it means that when the disaster is bad enough, as we saw in Lytton, the community simply cannot fulfill that role. And it really falls to higher levels of government, in this case, the province of British Columbia, to step in and play a lead role.

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Sophia Burton (Host): It was many months after the wildfire, before Michele was able to visit Lytton for the first time since her home was burnt to the ground.

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Michele: We were able to walk up and down Fraser Street just a little bit, and it felt so good to walk on that ground. There was a sense of scorch, but, you know, there was greenery, there were there, were flowers trying to come up. So the house looks like a bomb blast went off, but my elm tree, half of it was green and it sheltered a little bit of my lawn. It was this weird study in contrast.

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Yvonne Su: A lot of people do not consider this when they think about it, but insurance is one of the biggest barriers to rebuilding. And now this is very challenging for people who have just lost their home to a fire and have been told that heat waves, wildfires, will be more intense and more frequent in their area in the future. And they're being told by their insurance companies, no, you cannot rebuild your home, so it's more safe for you. We can only pay for what was damaged.

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Sophia Burton (Host): As challenging as it is for those directly affected, it is also difficult at a structural level to address risk situations in a preventative and holistic way.

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Will Greaves: In a broader sense, the insurance industry has been able to play a very positive role in terms of mitigating climate risk. So the insurance industry globally has actually been a force for good, so to speak, encouraging people to not build homes in very high risk climate environments.

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Michele: Most people in rural areas, if you live in a fire zone, cannot get fire insurance. The people that lost their homes outside of the municipality that didn't have fire insurance, they weren't fools. They just couldn't get it. They don't cover soil. If you live in a toxic village, um, like Lytton, the insurance companies say, well, sorry, we don't insure soil. So if your soil is toxic and has to be remediated, too bad. So sad. And that's not going to change.

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Will Greaves: We cannot continue to allow private property development in high climate risk zones, and expect there to be an effective state or government response when those high risk zones experience the risk. That is not a logical train of thought. So if we want to mitigate flooding events, or fire events, or extreme heat events, or extreme cold events, we need to recognize the risk factors and plan accordingly.

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Michele: If I think about how much I lost financially, it would make me crazy. So I put that in a separate category of, I will not worry about it.

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Will Greaves: It's really challenging, it's really expensive to actually rebuild thousands of homes, right? You need to bring in a workforce to do that. You need to provide temporary housing to that workforce, because there's no hotels or motels left in the community for people to live in. Right? And it's difficult for both political and community based reasons to have temporary housing that you provide to those construction workers, when the residents of the community themselves are displaced and want housing.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Will Greaves, whose research focuses on the interplay between politics, security, and climate change, underscores the complex nature of rebuilding communities devastated by climate related disasters.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Finding sustainable solutions for reconstruction does not come with straightforward answers.

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Will Greaves: Should the community be rebuilt exactly the way that it was? Should the community be rebuilt in a way that hardens and makes it more resilient to potential future wildfires, to potential future climate impacts? But if so, who's going to bear those additional costs of reconstruction? How many hundreds of millions of dollars can be justified on a community of 7 or 8 thousand people, when we also have climate impacts, of course, occurring in the far more populated centers, the larger cities, that affect millions of people. There is a limited pot of public resources to spend on climate resilience, among other public priorities.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Local climate resilience is about enhancing the capacity to prepare for and respond to various climate related hazards or trends. It involves assessing how climate change may create new risks or alter them, and taking steps to better cope with these risks.

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Michele: I worry that there's becoming various classes. I don't know if class is quite the right word, but categories of people. There's the people who lost their houses, the people who didn't lose their houses, people on the west side of the river, who still have their places, but they've lost their community. I mean, Lytton was a hub for 3000 people, so they've all lost. Even if they've got a home.

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Yvonne Su: There is a lot of miscommunication, lack of communication, and general lack of coordination between the three levels of government - federal, provincial, and municipal - and each are responsible for different aspects of the recovery. A lot of money has to come from the federal government to the provincial government, that eventually gets downloaded to the municipal government, but all of the rebuilding takes place at the municipal level.

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Michele: There's a lack of trust in the greater systems that are supposed to protect it. You know, the province has not protected its citizenry.

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Yvonne Su: It's not sexy politically to avoid a disaster. You want to be seen saving people after a disaster. You don't get re-elected by saying, I prevented 15 floods, 30

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wildfires, and I saved 10,000 people from having to be evacuated from their homes. Because your opponent will say, how do you know that? So unfortunately, politicians are incentivized to count how many evacuees there were. They can count how many dollars were spent. And that's what gets them elected, not preventing disasters.

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Sophia Burton (Host): So what lessons can we draw from the Lytton wildfire? How can governments and communities improve their awareness and preparedness for potential future disasters induced by climate change?

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Michele: Lytton has clear lessons to share with us, but we haven't yet seen a lot of evidence that governments at the provincial and federal levels, uh, are heeding those lessons, and incorporating them into our future disaster and emergency response planning.

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Michele: In hindsight, we didn't have a warning system in place, and we weren't actually connecting the dots around the heat dome, and what effect that was having, because we were in a drought from April onwards, and so the tinder was incredibly dry. We were 20 minutes before the fire, my friend Christine texted me and said, how are you doing? I said, it's fine, but one spark leads to disaster. I looked at my text and, holy crap, I was right on that one, you know, obviously. So we knew, but you know, there's a level of denial, and we were all just hoping it would, that we'd get through it. I do think that it's a fundamental question of selfishness, and until, maybe until big cities start to have some effects. You know, North Vancouver is a high risk fire area, and I do not wish ill of anyone. Okay, but the rural urban divide is real, and as long as it's the little people elsewhere, then policy is not probably going to change. So I don't know.

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Yvonne Su: I'm sure if we asked Canadians what they would want for themselves, if I said, if you were displaced by a wildfire, where would you want to go? How would you want to be treated? Everyone would say they want doors to be open. They want food to be provided for them. They want new clothes. That's the natural answer. And that does happen in the first couple of weeks, maybe the first couple of months, but the second resources generally become a problem, that's when people start to get hostile towards other Canadians, towards their neighbors. Let's create policies that are going to foster host communities in being welcoming and help their neighbors after a disaster. And let's not turn it into a negative thing. Let's not force mayors to declare states of emergency because their neighbors need their help.

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Will Greaves: As we reflect on the lessons from Lytton, we return to the question posed at the very start of this episode. How can we better understand what climate change actually means for our lives? The experiences and insights shared today

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illustrate not only the immediate responses to disasters, but urge us to consider deeper, more systemic changes.

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Michele: A community like Lytton, that has been devastated, really can't reasonably be asked to take the lead in their own reconstruction. How can they? What we need are tools and resources provided by higher levels of government, that have the capacity, that have climate expertise, that have financial resources, to really provide those resources downwards to local governments, so that they can make better planning decisions in ways that will increase their ability to adapt when climate disaster strikes.

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Sophia Burton (Host): And that concludes the first part of our Voices on the Move double feature on Canada's response to climate related migration. Thank you to our experts, Dr. Yvonne Su of York University and Dr. Will Greaves of University of Victoria. A special thanks to Michele for sharing her experience. To read her full story along with others from Canada. Visit the Climate Disaster Project's website. You'll find the link in our show notes. Also in the show notes (www.climatedisasterproject.com). are additional resources and research links that helped inform this episode. Tune in next time for part two of this Canada double feature, focusing on the unique challenges and impacts of the Lytton wildfire and climate change more broadly on indigenous communities.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Voices on the Move is a podcast series developed by Migration Matters, York University, Samuel Hall, and the HABITABLE research project. The project is funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and hosted by the Dahdaleh Institute for Global Health Research at York University. Our producer and senior story editor is Bernadette Klausberger. Our editorial team includes Frankie Reid and for the interview with Michele, Sean Holman, Aldyn Chwelos, and Christina Gervais. The series is edited by Line Schulz. Audio engineering and sound design by Tim Strasburger-Schmidt. Original music by Eliah Arnold. Studio facilities provided by alias film und sprachtransfer. I'm Sophia Burton, your host. Until next time with more Voices on the Move.