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# What Will Change: Rafi Youatt on Border Politics and Ecology



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*The next four years will prove to be unprecedented in the roll-back and dismantling of environmental protections. In our new series, What Will Change, Tishman Center Affiliated Faculty reflect on the environmental and social justice impacts of the election results from*

*the perspectives of their research,  
practice, and passion.*

***By Rafi Youatt***

I study the ways that ecological regimes intersect political life in international relations. Donald Trump's looming presidency raises many deep concerns in this area, particularly over climate change. He has vowed to undo the hard fought consensus of the Paris Accords, which just came into force this year, while doubling down on fossil fuel extraction. His current pick to lead the EPA transition, a prominent climate change skeptic, and his plans to scrap the Clean Power Act only heighten those concerns. Coal will be embraced, though fracking and natural gas will continue to rise. Struggles against pipelines are unlikely to be heard sympathetically. And there will be significant reverberations in other countries tackling climate change as well, particularly in China and India. These climate change issues alone are cause for grave concern. His presidency also raises a deeper political specter, involving the intersection of border politics, environmental issues, and the question of which lives are worthy. As is well known, Trump has frequently talked up building a Wall along the US-Mexico border, adding to the hundreds of miles of fencing

and barriers that have already been built. By most accounts, Trump's wall would be both a disaster for border communities and migrants, and a conservation disaster for wildlife, putting dozens of species at risk by slashing through communities and multispecies habitats. But what is even more troubling is the deeper way that Trumpist political rhetoric (going well beyond Trump himself) grounds these policies. It links "unacceptable" humans to degraded animality, and holds nonhuman life – animal, ecosystemic, planetary – in a deep contempt, in ways that permit that negative linkage to be made in the first place. In August, for example, he spoke against letting immigrants from the Philippines and other countries into the US, calling them "animals" from "terrorist nations." In March, he compared immigrants to "venomous snakes." The list could go on. For Trump, animal life is disposable and insidious, even (and especially) when it is biologically human. In many ways, Trump reasserts disconcertingly familiar forms of hierarchy that raise up the worthiness of only some kinds of life, using American nationalism, misogyny, and Islamophobia as its cleaver. But he is doing so on the back of a familiar kind of political humanism that operates by claiming dominance over and excluding

animality, both nonhuman animals and animalized humans. This contempt for nonhuman life, and its association with ostensibly unworthy forms of human life, undergirds his political rhetoric and policy orientations on borders as well on climate change, ecological sustainability, and environmental justice. It will take concrete form in the days to come in decisions about deportation, border walls, climate change, and environmental protection. As scholars, students, and publics, we can act to push back in a number of ways. We can pay greater attention to the life in the borderlands themselves, where we can actively amplify the possibilities for a counter-political imaginary. Border communities, who have lived across the border for many years, continue to exemplify a way of life that is cross-border. Art installations along the border wall continue to show us ways to think about an active border that need not mean a closed community. And new interspecies imaginaries, linking migrant rights and wildlife corridors, and pointing to endangered lives both human and nonhuman, push towards a new politics where environmentalists and social justice advocates work together, both within the United States and transnationally. It is not enough, but it is a start. *Rafi Youatt is an*

*Assistant Professor of Politics at [The New School for Social Research](#).*



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