Compact of Free Association (COFA) Status: An Imperial Policy on the Move

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I. INTRODUCTION

I am so honored to be part of this Symposium on "Unpacking the Compacts of Free Association." I want to extend my deep appreciation to Keoni Moen Williams and the other members of the Asian-Pacific Law & Policy Journal for inviting me to participate in this important conference. I am especially humbled to be here in the presence of so many inspiring Micronesian leaders in the struggle for COFA migrants' rights and other social justice movements across Oceania.

I am a geographer who studies human migration, and my research explores the tensions and intersection between U.S. imperialism, decolonization, and immigration policy. I also hold a Master's in Public Administration and have worked as an immigration paralegal and immigrants' rights advocate, and so my work is directly informed by a policy-based approach to immigrants' rights activism. My forthcoming book, *New Destinations of Empire: Racial Geographies and Imperial Citizenship in the Transpacific U.S. South*,[1] examines the legal and policy

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[1] Under contract, University of Georgia Press.

constructions of Compact of Free Association migration status, or COFA status, which is the legal status held by many Micronesians, Marshall Islanders, and Palauans living in the U.S. Established by a set of bilateral agreements between the U.S. and the RMI, the FSM, and Palau, the Compacts' visa-free migration provision grants the option to live, work, and attend school in the U.S. without a visa to hundreds of thousands of people. COFA migration thus constitutes an anomaly in U.S. immigration law. However, within my larger research and as I argue here, COFA status shares many characteristics with other provisional legal statuses historically granted to imperial subjects of the U.S.[2]

As a geographer, I am interested in the geographic dimensions of migration within and across the U.S. empire, drawing on a tradition of legal and political geography that examines how power, politics, rights, and resistance shape space and place.[3] And COFA status generates some compelling, and vexing, *geographical* questions: Is COFA visa-free migration an *international* agreement, as part of the Compact of Free Association? Is it a *colonial* policy, elaborated between the U.S. and its former territories within the novel geopolitical arrangement of Freely Associated Statehood? Is it a U.S. *immigration* policy, one enacted at the federal level, then interpreted and enforced at state and local levels? In other words, what kind of policy is the COFA migration policy, and what kind of legal status is COFA status? What does it mean for a policy to have a *geography?*

The answers to these questions are not simple. As I will argue in this talk, COFA migration policy—and, thus, COFA status—is complex for two reasons that have to do with its geography. First, COFA status is geographically *multiscalar*, which is to say that it intersects multiple realms of law and policy, from bilateral international agreements to U.S. immigration law to state policies to local ordinances. Since COFA migration policy pertains to places at the legal and geographic margins of the U.S. empire, and to populations at the margins of U.S. citizenship, it gets fleshed out at the interstices of different legal jurisdictions.

Second, as a policy that mainly affects people living in diaspora—Marshall Islanders, Micronesians, and Palauans living outside their countries of origin in the U.S.—COFA migration policy is a policy "on the move." As COFA status "travels" to new sites with COFA migrants, it constantly traverses different areas of law and policy, including state, local

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[2] *See generally* MAE M. NGAI, IMPOSSIBLE SUBJECTS: ILLEGAL ALIENS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN AMERICA (2014); RICK BALDOZ, THE THIRD ASIATIC INVASION: EMPIRE AND MIGRATION IN FILIPINO AMERICA, 1898-1946 (2011); EDLIE L. WONG, RACIAL RECONSTRUCTION: BLACK INCLUSION, CHINESE EXCLUSION, AND THE FICTIONS OF CITIZENSHIP (2015).

[3] *See generally* Sherally Munshi, *Race, Geography, and Mobility*, 30 GEO. IMMIGR. L. REV. 245 (2016), https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2908139.

or municipal, and U.S. federal policy, and gets interpreted and implemented in incredibly uneven and sometimes unintelligible ways on the ground.

These two geographical dimensions or characteristics of COFA status—first, that it is multiscalar, always existing across multiple areas of the law, and second, that it is mobile or 'on the move'—result from its imperial nature. Furthermore, these qualities exacerbate COFA migrant status's liminality or in-between-ness and thus, the marginality, illegibility, and exclusion that COFA migrants often face in diaspora.

So, in today's talk, I will begin by providing context on the geopolitical and historical significance of visa-free migration to the COFA agreements and to the Micronesian political status negotiations during the long transition out of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI) period, administered by the U.S. from 1946-1986. The period following the TTPI's end ushered in a more ambiguous, but arguably still neocolonial or imperial, relationship between the FAS and the U.S. Yet visa-free migration provisions were a crucial lynchpin of the Compact for Micronesian and Marshallese negotiators, an assertion of Micronesian peoples' right to determine the political conditions of their own mobility. The fact that these provisions were on the table during political status negotiations—and that they remain in place for FAS citizens today—is a testament to the political vision, savvy, and tenacity of Micronesian negotiators and activists who prioritized them.

After presenting this historical context, I will briefly discuss COFA status as a form of what I call "imperial citizenship": a liminal, exceptional, and exclusionary legal status held by subjects of an empire that is defined and enforced by the imperial power—in this case, the U.S.—but also given form and meaning by the activism of its beneficiaries. A familiar historical example of imperial citizenship is the non-citizen U.S. national status of Filipinos from 1899 to 1946, during the period of formal U.S. colonialism in the Philippines. While this legal status generally protected Filipinos from being denied entry to the U.S. during a time of strict Asian exclusion, it curtailed Filipinos' rights in the U.S. in various ways. These characteristics of imperial citizenship likewise produce deleterious effects for COFA migrants living in the U.S., whose liminal legal status makes them vulnerable in a myriad of ways. It also poses challenges to policy-makers and other key actors who are working to interpret COFA status and proffer its rights, benefits, and protections on the ground, especially in newer destinations of resettlement.

Next, to show these effects on COFA migrants and the key actors who encounter COFA migration policy on the ground, I will follow this "policy on the move" to Springdale, Arkansas, now the largest site in the Marshallese diaspora, with upwards of 12,000 Marshall Islanders and Marshallese-American residents.[4] I draw upon my fieldwork in Springdale,

[4] Based on community estimates.

conducted between 2013-2021, as well as fieldwork in Little Rock, Arkansas; Washington, D.C.; Honolulu, Hawai'i; Saipan and Tinian (Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands) and Guåhan, as well as archival research at the Reagan and Clinton Presidential Libraries. This research consists of 65 formal interviews and about 60 informational interviews with policy actors, public officials including ambassadors and embassy staff, GAO staff, Marshallese community advocates and non-profit workers, as well as policy analysis, archival research, participant observation at community organizing meetings, social justice rallies, court hearings, festivals, and other community events.

Finally, I look to the COFA migrant-led activism to ask: What does it mean to demand and safeguard full rights for COFA migrants in the U.S.? Which factors present the greatest impediments to those rights, and what kinds of strategies are most effective in protecting COFA migrants' rights presently? Here and throughout my talk, I want to emphasize COFA migrants' agency to determine the conditions of their own mobility, their citizenship status, and their islands' political status, often amidst intensely challenging political conditions. COFA migrants and FAS citizens in the islands must confront not only the whims of U.S. geopolitical interests, which drive U.S. efforts to maintain exclusive military access to the islands, but also contentious and xenophobic immigration debates in the U.S. Across the broader region of Micronesia, and in COFA diaspora sites from Arkansas to Hawai'i to Oregon, COFA status acquires its meaning not only from the top-down by state actors or U.S. geopolitical interests, but also from the bottom-up by activists organizing for more just forms of mobility and a more robust set of rights.

II. COFA Status as a Liminal Legal Status: Historical Roots and Legal Construction

Now, I want to give a bit more context about COFA status, where it originated, and how it came to embody a kind of liminal legality, which is alluded to in the title of this panel. The term liminal means in-between or transitional, and speaks to the marginal, often ambiguous, legal position of COFA migrants living in the U.S. What does it mean that COFA status is a liminal legal status, and how did it attain that quality?

To get to the heart of this question, we need to look to the policy's inception and the political context in which it was formed, which is to say, at the tail end of formal U.S. colonialism in Micronesia and the broader Pacific in the decades following WWII and at the onset of what many have heralded as a period of U.S. *neo*colonialism in the region.[5] COFA migration

[5] The FSM, RMI, and Palau gained independence from the U.S. in 1986 and 1994 respectively. However, the U.S. has continued to wield considerable influence over the political, economic, and military dynamics in these countries since formal independence, and it maintains a formal colonial presence in Guåhan and the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), the latter a former TTPI district.

status is the product of U.S. geopolitical and imperial policy-making in Micronesia, baked into the process of formal decolonization and the emergence of the U.S. Freely Associated Statehood (FAS) of the RMI, FSM, and Palau. FAS itself is the product of a years-long deliberation over Micronesian political status, a process in which various political status options were debated.

The U.S., like many empires facing crises of legitimacy and power during the global decolonial wave of the 1950s and 1960s, worked to elaborate new forms of geopolitical "partnerships" with its territories at the conclusion of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (1946-1986). Part and parcel to these new geopolitical arrangements was the emergence of forms of imperial citizenship, a constellation of legal statuses granted to former subjects of empires, from the Windrush Generation of former British colonial subjects, many from the Caribbean, to the residents of the ten other UN Trust Territories across the Pacific and Africa. I mention this larger context to emphasize that, while the experiences of COFA migrants and COFA migration policy are in some ways very unique (and anomalous among other national-level immigration policies), they are also in many ways a broader, more global phenomenon relating to the production of liminal forms of citizenship for formerly colonized populations as global empires necessarily changed forms in the late 20th and early 21st century.

As laid out in the 1986 U.S-RMI and U.S.-FSM Compacts, FAS citizens have the right to live, work, and attend school in the U.S. without a visa. This provision makes COFA status incredibly unique within U.S. immigration law: very few other immigrant groups have the right to indefinite visa-free migration in the U.S. While this legal status has some obvious benefits for COFA migrants in the U.S., especially compared to many other immigrant groups, it has some significant limitations as well, all of which impact people's livelihoods and quality of life. As one U.S. policy analyst I interviewed told me, "It's an example of the [U.S.] federal government giving with one hand and taking away with the other."[6]

COFA status, I argue, functions as a kind of imperial citizenship for its holders. Forms of imperial citizenship, as I understand them, are created by former or current colonial powers, often through piecemeal policies, legislation, and agreements, as an *exception* to regular immigration law. This creates a kind of second-class citizenship similar to statuses held historically by people in Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Philippines, for example, as well as islanders in diaspora. As I conceptualize it, imperial citizenship has three primary characteristics: it is liminal, exceptional, and exclusionary. Let me discuss each of these characteristics in turn, and then, in the next part of my talk, I will offer a few examples of how these qualities materialize on the ground in COFA migrant destinations.

[6] All names of research participants have been omitted to protect their anonymity.

First, imperial citizenship is **liminal**: it is an "in-between" legal status created to apply to those people and places that occupy the space between metropole and colony, foreign and domestic, foreigner and citizen, and "legal" and "illegal." Non-sovereign people and places within the empire are often at the margins of these insider/outsider constructs, and imperial citizenship reflects and reinforces that liminal positioning.

Second, imperial citizenship is **exceptional**: it is created as an exception or a caveat to existing federal immigration and citizenship laws. Imperial citizenship is often created through piecemeal policies, legislation, and bilateral agreements or treaties between an imperial power and its current or former territory—in other words, using legal instruments that create unique conditions for imperial subjects (populations that are presently or formerly colonized).

Finally, imperial citizenship is **exclusionary**: it creates a second-class status that, while preferential when compared to many other immigrant legal statuses, nonetheless produces vulnerability, marginalization, and forms of rightlessness in its holders. Yet, imperial citizenship's exclusionary effects can also foster solidaristic ties between imperial citizens and other marginalized groups, prompting activist strategies to resist shared experiences of exclusion. These three qualities of COFA legal status shape, and are shaped by, its two geographic characteristics: that it is multiscalar and mobile, or "on the move."

Analyzing COFA status as a form of imperial citizenship reveals that, despite the rights and benefits that it proffers, its partial, contingent, and revocable nature constitutes a kind of rightlessness that produces precarity and uncertainty for those who hold it. By understanding COFA status *as* imperial—as produced through imperial processes, using imperial logics, and activated on imperial or colonized geographies—we can see not only the effects or qualities of this legal status, but also the central role of empire in producing those effects for migrants from non-sovereign territories.

While COFA status's parameters are laid out in *federal* law and policy, as well as in a bilateral *international* agreement, it is also produced in meaningful and foundational ways at the *state* and *local* levels, through the Compact's intersection with local laws and policies which gives additional specificity and form to its terms. For example, while COFA migrants were rendered ineligible for Medicaid—a U.S. federal program—from 1996 to 2020, some U.S. states, like New York and California, opted to provide healthcare services to COFA migrants using their own funds during that time, creating an uneven patchwork of healthcare coverage for COFA migrants across state lines. COFA status also accumulates meaning as key actors in COFA migrant destinations interpret and apply it, often in inconsistent ways. COFA status's uneven application both within and between different places where COFA migrants live shapes its effects on

COFA migrants' rights in practice, as much as does the formal legal definition of this legal status.

III. COFA STATUS AS LIMINAL LEGAL STATUS: A POLICY "ON THE MOVE" AND ON THE GROUND

So, what does COFA status—as a form of imperial citizenship—look like on the ground? And what are some of the challenges of U.S. and FAS policy-makers implementing COFA migration policy and a myriad of policies that intersect with it, including policies in health care, education, housing, and labor?

To answer these questions, I want to zoom into the town of Springdale in Northwest Arkansas, which is now home to the largest Marshallese community outside of the islands. Marshall Islanders began arriving to Springdale in small numbers in the mid-1980s, after the Compact's original passage, and have swelled in recent years, now including many second- and third-generation Marshallese-Americans. Accompanying this community's growth are the establishment of several Marshallese-led organizations and a Marshallese Consulate. As such, Springdale boasts a well-established and expanding network of Marshallese advocates working in areas of legal advocacy, education, interpretation and translation, and public health to connect Marshall Islanders with the resources and information they need to thrive in their new home.

Now, as I mentioned in my introduction, when policies and their beneficiaries travel across different jurisdictions—across state lines, between territories of different political statuses, and even from town to town—they morph somewhat as they intersect with different policy landscapes on the ground. As a result, COFA status, while defined fairly simply in the Compacts, is functionally very uneven on the ground, varying greatly in its lived meaning from place to place.

Despite this uneven-ness in COFA policy implementation across diverse geographical and legal landscapes, COFA status consistently exhibits the three qualities of imperial citizenship: it is liminal, exceptional, and exclusionary. As a result, COFA migrants must constantly contend with these conditions, advocating against *exclusionary* policies as well as educating public actors and policy-makers to counter pervasive unfamiliarity with COFA status, an unfamiliarity that results from its *liminal* and *exceptional* nature. Let me offer a few examples from my research to show what I mean by this.

A first example has to do with COFA migrants' legal liminality that positions them outside the "legal"/"illegal" binary logic in which law enforcement, immigration officials, and other legal actors often operate. While COFA migrants are not *undocumented*, in contrast to many of their Latinx counterparts across the U.S. South and Midwest, they *are* legally subject to deportation if convicted of certain crimes. COFA migrants' vulnerability to deportation fluctuates over time, depending on regional-

and national-level immigration-related policies and tensions, showing again how COFA status's lived meaning is produced at multiple scales. When I first visited Springdale in 2013, deportation of Marshallese COFA migrants in the area was exceedingly rare. However, when I returned in Summer 2019, during the Trump administration and following a spate of ICE raids across the U.S. South, COFA migrant deportations had skyrocketed, along with deportations of undocumented Latinx immigrants, according to the consul and local community advocates. This was not because COFA status *itself* had changed in any foundational way, but rather, that the criteria that local actors used to determine and gauge COFA migrants' deportability had shifted. Specifically, it appeared, police and immigration agents were more likely to charge Marshallese COFA migrants with crimes of moral turpitude (CIMTs), any act designated a crime that indicates some degree of immorality or character flaw. Moral turpitude is a catch-all charge that can cover anything from larceny, assault, or domestic violence to public intoxication and noise disturbance.

While often a minor infraction, the effects of a moral turpitude charge can be devastating; as the Immigrant Legal Resource Center notes, "A single CIMT conviction might cause no damage, or it might cause a variety of penalties ranging from deportability to ineligibility for relief to mandatory detention."[7] One Springdale-based legal advocate elaborated on how this snow-ball effect often looked for her Marshallese clients: "When you're talking about immigration documents, all the Marshallese need is a passport and I-94. [But] there's a combination of things. You could be summoned to court to go for a traffic violation, and then you fail to pay your fines, and it just builds up. A little thing can absolutely build up into bigger things, which could lead to a deportable offense." In other words, whether legal mechanisms for COFA migrants' deportability from (or inadmissibility to) the U.S. are activated in any given context, the fact of these provisions' existence, and thus their *potential* implementation, creates an additional layer of precarity for COFA migrants.

A second example I offer has to do with COFA migrants' exceptional status in U.S. law and policy, particularly in the context of social services. Because COFA migrants' access to social service programs and benefits is often created as policy-add-ons—as *exceptions*—their access to such protections is piecemeal, contingent, and tenuous. This includes everything from affordable housing and healthcare to drivers' licenses and student loan eligibility. COFA migrants' eligibility for these programs can vary greatly state-to-state and can also be jeopardized by local actors' unfamiliarity with COFA status's terms.

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[7] Kathy Brady, *All Those Rules About Crimes Involving Moral Turpitude*, IMMIGR. LEGAL RES. CTR. 6 (June 22, 2021), https://www.ilrc.org/resources/all-those-rules-about-crimes-involving-moral-turpitude-june-2021.

One of the most pressing issues for COFA migrants, of course, has been Medicaid (in)eligibility, an issue that also illuminates COFA status as an exclusionary legal status. As many of you may know, from 1994 until only two years ago, Marshall Islanders in the U.S. had been ineligible for Medicaid. This restriction was overturned in Congress in December 2020, thanks to the tireless advocacy of Senator Mazie Hirono (HI) and her colleagues, but not before thousands of Marshallese COFA migrants in the U.S. contracted and died from COVID-19. At the height of the pandemic, Pacific Islanders in the U.S. were hospitalized at up to ten times the rate of other groups nationwide.[8] Because many Marshall Islanders living in the U.S. South work in meatpacking and elder care, they were more likely to be exposed to COVID early on. Paradoxically, however, they were also more likely to be told by authorities and by the media that their preexisting health conditions, like diabetes, were to blame for their health vulnerabilities.[9] This example illustrates the real, devastating effects of COFA status's liminality, which often has deadly consequences for COFA migrants.

A third policy that both reveals and exacerbates COFA migrants' exceptional legal status is the public charge rule. USCIS defines a public charge as an immigrant who is likely to become primarily dependent upon the government for assistance. The term "public charge" was first introduced by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, as an effort to keep out working-class Chinese immigrants.[10] Since the late 1800s, political leaders have intermittently reinstated the public charge rule to effectively filter out low-income immigrants who might access public benefits, often at times of heightened national xenophobia. This history shows the long lifespan of this legal mechanism of racial and class-based immigrant exclusion.

While COFA migrants have not yet, to my knowledge, been deported from the U.S. based on the public charge rule, the option remains in the law, and many politicians have considered it, including former President Trump. In August 2019, when Trump was publicly proposing a reinstatement of the public charge rule, I interviewed several Marshallese non-profit leaders and community advocates in Arkansas about how this potential reinstatement might affect their community. Many Marshallese COFA migrants were worried that by using benefits to which they were legally entitled, they might be jeopardizing their COFA status and, thus,

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[8] Lagipoiva Cherelle Jackson, *Pacific Islanders in US Hospitalised with COVID-19 at up to 10 Times the Rate of Other Groups*, THE GUARDIAN (Jul. 26, 2020, 6:00 PM), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/27/system-is-so-broken-covid-19-devastates-pacific-islander-communities-in-us.

[9] Emily Mitchell-Eaton, *No Island is an Island: COVID Exposure, Marshall Islanders, and Imperial Productions of Race and Remoteness*, SOC'Y & SPACE (May 31, 2021), https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/no-island-is-an-island.

[10] *See generally* ERIKA LEE, AT AMERICA'S GATES: CHINESE IMMIGRATION DURING THE EXCLUSION ERA, 1882-1943 (2003).

their right to remain in the U.S. One non-profit actor summarized such concerns:

> The public charge issue is really scary, because Marshallese go in and out [of the U.S.] all the time, and most of our folks are at poverty or below. So that could potentially affect us, even though we do have this special relationship [with the U.S]. Not letting people back into the U.S. because they feel like we're needy: it's so wrong on so many levels. I mean, we did not choose this. We're very angry. And people are scared.

Her comment reveals the palpable anger, fear, and frustration felt by many COFA migrants facing this rule's proposal and the unfairness they felt at being treated this way by the U.S. government, with whom their countries supposedly share a 'special relationship.' This policy issue also gestures to the larger logics of exclusion working against COFA migrants in the U.S.

In summary, just as charges of moral turpitude are being used more frequently to deport Marshallese COFA migrants, the threat of the public charge rule has been used to discourage COFA migrants from seeking services for which they are eligible, for fear it might prevent them from obtaining U.S. citizenship in the future. In other words, the logics of criminality and immorality ("moral turpitude") and dependency logics ("public charge"), logics that have historically been weaponized against other immigrant groups in times of intensified xenophobia, have now been mobilized again in COFA migrant destinations like Springdale to exacerbate the exceptional nature of COFA status and its holders' tenuous access to social services, programs, and benefits, as well as their protection against deportation.

IV. COMPACT FUTURES: TOWARD MORE JUST FORMS OF COFA MIGRATION

Shifting politics at multiple scales, such as those described above, often create uncertainty about the legal status and rights of COFA migrants. While many U.S. state actors I have interviewed express confidence that the COFA migration provision is unlikely to disappear anytime soon, many COFA migrants and FAS citizens are wary as this year's Compact renegotiations play out. They have witnessed the migration provision's gradual erosion since its inception, through increasing deportations, inconsistent application of immigration policies by ICE and CBP agents, and periodic reinstatements of the public charge rule, both in Arkansas and elsewhere. Although these policies do not *eliminate* COFA migrants' legal right to migrate to the U.S., they effectively *weaken* it through piecemeal restrictions and limitations. Many Marshall Islanders also recall the post-9/11 period when COFA migration permissions were almost revoked entirely due to U.S. border security concerns. They worry that another

geopolitical conflict could place COFA migration rights, and even the Compact itself, back on the chopping block.

Given this complex legal landscape for COFA migrants, the often-mercurial nature of U.S. immigration law and its uneven implementations at the state level, and the larger shifting geopolitical terrain of the Compacts of Free Association—two of which are up for renewal or renegotiation this year—what is to be done? How can we effectively promote understanding of COFA status and protect COFA migrants' rights? Again, I turn to the work of activists in the COFA diaspora, work that is, in many cases, also supported by broader coalitions for immigrant justice, racial justice, nuclear reparations, and decolonization. Many of those activists and community leaders are present here today, and I am humbled to be in their company. In particular, I would like to recognize Dr. Sheldon Riklon, also presenting in this conference, for his decades of advocacy, healthcare provision, and community leadership for Marshall Islanders in the U.S. I also want to recognize two Arkansas-based groups, the Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese (ACOM) and the Marshallese Education Initiative (MEI), for their long-standing advocacy around issues of housing access, workers' rights, and healthcare, among many others. Their tireless efforts on some of the policy issues outlined above has been crucial for securing COFA migrants' rights and livelihoods. Now, with a growing number of Arkansas-based organizations dedicated to immigrants' rights, workers' rights, and racial justice, COFA migrants in Arkansas are well-poised to fight for their rights in the coming years.

This groundswell of social justice organizing is also visible at larger geographic scales across Arkansas and the U.S. South. Organizations like the Arkansas Citizens First Congress bring together movements for immigrants' rights and racial justice with focuses on prison abolition, reproductive justice, disability justice, and housing rights, among others. This organizing trend is accompanied by an increase in labor demands in the South, as unionization picks up speed across sectors, even in staunchly "right-to-win" states. These gains are, in part, a result of immigrant workers establishing their presence in new immigrant destinations over recent decades, building new homes and strengthening community ties. Political organizing in new immigrant destinations often grows over time, especially as those communities see gains in visibility, political representation, and voter turnout. Yet, as history has shown, political gains toward rights for racialized, working-class, and imperial subjects must be continually struggled over, as they perennially come under attack during periods of heightened xenophobia and white supremacy.

What we can learn from this multi-sited, coalitional approach is that COFA migrants' voices, perspectives, and demands must be at the center of Compact renegotiations and implementation.[11] Recent GAO reports,

[11] Emil Friberg, *No Time to Lose: Renew the Compacts of Free Association*, EAST-

informed by findings gathered during numerous GAO staff visits to the FAS and COFA migrant communities, highlight the importance of healthcare access and climate change assistance to COFA migrants, particularly to Marshall Islanders contending with the long-lasting, intergenerational effects of U.S. nuclear testing.[12] U.S. and FAS policy-makers must continue to prioritize such input from COFA migrant communities, as those populations are most directly impacted by COFA status' liminal quality. COFA migrant activists and advocates have already shown how we can build a stronger alliance for COFA migrant justice by forging connections and strategies across dispersed sites and scales, including through events like this symposium. In other words, as COFA migration policy, a "policy on the move," travels with COFA migrants to more new sites in diaspora, the lived knowledge of COFA migrant activist networks continues to deepen, and we must continue to heed their diasporic insights.

WEST CENTER (June 29, 2022), https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/no-time-lose-renew-the-compacts-free-association.

[12] U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., COMPACTS OF FREE ASSOCIATION: IMPLICATIONS OF PLANNED ENDING OF SOME U.S. ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE (2022), https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104436; U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., COMPACTS OF FREE ASSOCIATION: POPULATIONS IN U.S. AREAS HAVE GROWN, WITH VARYING REPORTED EFFECTS (2020), https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-491.