

S2 E3
How We Tell the Story of Disaster
Transcript

Crystal Felima: Yes, we have disaster narratives of suffering, but we also have disaster narratives of people striving and surviving....

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Hello and welcome to *Material Memory*. I'm your host, Nicole Kang Ferraiolo.

Among the most visible impacts of climate change on cultural heritage are climate disasters. In this episode we'll be talking with Dr. Crystal Felima, who's examined disasters through many different lenses: as an anthropologist and Africana studies scholar, a cultural heritage practitioner, an emergency management specialist at FEMA, and as a Black woman of Haitian descent. We'll get into how each of these lenses has influenced her work around disasters. Specifically, we'll think about how we tell the stories of disasters, and where libraries and the cultural record fit into all of this.

Crystal Felima: I am Crystal Felima. I graduated from the University of Florida with my PhD in anthropology. Right now, I'm working at the Federal Emergency Management Agency in Washington, DC, and my position is an emergency management specialist, and I'm a planning analyst.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: A quick note that the views Crystal is sharing here are hers alone and do not represent those of FEMA or the US government.

Crystal Felima: My work as a researcher centers on climate change, flooding, hurricanes, vulnerability assessments in the Caribbean, specifically Haiti. My work has focused on disasters in Haiti and also disasters in Puerto Rico. That work definitely provides a lot of background information for what I do at FEMA today.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: So, I'd be curious, what made you decide to become an emergency manager for FEMA instead of going into academia?

Crystal Felima: Yeah, I think I ask that question a lot myself, but I think one thing that I realized who you know I am as a scholar is I am an applied anthropologist. I'm a practical anthropologist. I'm an engaged anthropologist. And that required me to get out of academia to see how practice works. I needed to really understand the workings of emergency management, you know, on the front lines. I've served three activations, Hurricane Dorian, earthquake in Puerto Rico, COVID-19. So that experience, I would've never had that experience if I was in academia.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: I wanted to know how Crystal got started working with disasters.

Crystal Felima: So, I participated in an undergraduate research program right before my senior year of college. It was on hurricanes and I did not know anything about hurricanes, but I applied for the research program anyway and was selected. And the program was all about vulnerability and I decided to pick Haiti as my project because I didn't know, Oh yeah, let's see if Haiti has vulnerability. And I was like, Oh wow, there's a lot of vulnerability in Haiti. I continued that project for my master's thesis. I continued it for my [dissertation](#), continued that for my postdoctoral research. And that's what I do now. You know, continuing that work at FEMA. So yeah, so surprising that that undergraduate research program led me to my current position. So yeah. Crazy how the things work [laugh].

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: I asked Crystal why it's important how we talk about disasters.

Crystal Felima: Well, it's so important to understand that disaster narratives are not singular, or the human experience is not singular. Haiti is a very, very interesting and complex place because we understand that Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. But that narrative has been the singular narrative and it permeates all literature. Yes, we have disaster narratives of suffering, but we also have disaster narratives of people striving and surviving.

In my classes, if I present Haiti, I will not only show them pictures of flooding, you know, people's suffering, but I'm also showing them people in the street celebrating Mardi Gras, or you know, women dressed up in their Haitian Voodoo beautiful gowns. So, you know, I made sure that they have more representations, more visual aids so that they can understand that the human experience is very multidimensional.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: For Crystal, this work isn't just about academics and pedagogy.

Crystal Felima: My work has always been personal. So, you know, for me, the work that I've done in Haiti, the work that I've done in Puerto Rico, the work that I've done for marginalized communities, some of the most marginalized communities in Haiti, has always been like a reflection of who I am. So, like me as a Black woman and who was also of Haitian descent, I think that my experience as a researcher can lend additional insights to how the research process works in a place like Haiti. How does my identity inform my research questions?

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Do you still have family in Haiti?

Crystal Felima: I do. My entire—my father's from Haiti and so my siblings are still there and nieces and nephews, everybody, everyone is still there.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Crystal and I spoke back in May 2020 during the first wave of COVID-19 and it wasn't clear when she'd be able to go back to Haiti.

Crystal Felima: I don't know if I will be traveling anytime soon.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: How was that for you personally?

Crystal Felima: It kinda sucks cause I'm like, I wanted to go see my family in Haiti this year. So, it's definitely putting, you know, some things in perspective.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: In addition to thinking about how we form narratives about Haiti, Crystal is thinking about who has access to these stories and related materials. This is reflected in her work in the field of Digital Humanities or “DH.”

Crystal Felima: How do we think about technology and also think about access? Who's writing or who's creating digital humanities projects for Haiti? Do Haitians have access to these projects? Really critical questions about, how does DH—how is it a benefit, but how can it, how can it also present some challenges for people in Haiti. Cause we think about accessibility with digital humanities. Sometimes we may not think about, you know, some of those challenges with authorship and access and upload and download and all these other different things.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Uploading, downloading, and even viewing images online takes internet bandwidth, which is not equally distributed. Projects and platforms designed for computer screens may not work correctly for people who only have access to the internet via mobile device, which is estimated to be the case for [three quarters of global internet users](#) by the year 2025. Approaches to digital information that don't consider this digital divide risk excluding significant pockets of the population, largely in underprivileged communities. What does it mean to have a digital project about Haiti that Haitians themselves don't have access to?

Of course, Haitians aren't the only audience for narratives about Haiti, and how we tell disaster narratives can have real implications and consequences.

Crystal Felima: You know, like as someone who is of Haitian descent, there's, there's a reason why I not only talk about, you know, poverty, but I also have to talk about agency. You know, not only do I talk about victimization, but I also have to talk about survivorship. Like those, it's just not one, you know, one box I will present to a reader or to my students. It would never be that. I've always thought that my work is all about advocacy; it's all about making sure that we do not contribute to exceptionalizing Haiti as if it's some destitute state of poverty. And I think that's just because of how precarious my identity could be, operating in a system known as the United States.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Might you be able to share a story of humans striving and surviving that's particularly stuck with you?

Crystal Felima: Well, I have several [laugh]. They exist everywhere, whether that's political graffiti, art, dances, song, it exists everywhere in Haiti. And one thing that stuck with me, I was collecting disaster narratives and one specific participant, she said that yes, you know, a lot of people here, they have you know, they don't have money, they don't have medicine if it floods and they might need to take some antibiotics, et cetera. But you know, when it floods, she said

when it floods my neighbors, they'll come to my house because I have a two-story house and I tell them to bring their food and we go through the second floor and we cook, and everybody eats. [laugh] you know, it was just, you know, thinking about like thinking about social networks and why social networks are so important you know, you have the community that is so important for people's survival, right? And so, people are the first responders, you know, that they're not relying on the Haitian government. They're not relying on organizations; they're relying on themselves. So, you know, I thought that was like, that was one of the stories that stuck with me. She was just like, yes, we're going to eat. It's going to be okay. You know? And it was just great. It was great.

[Pause, music]

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Related to how we tell the stories of disasters is how we collect and preserve community memory in hazard-prone regions. Crystal knows a thing or two about this. In addition to her academic and emergency management backgrounds, she has first-hand experience working in an academic library. Crystal was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Florida Libraries, through a fellowship program that CLIR runs.

We spoke about some of the impacts disasters can have on libraries.

Crystal Felima: So, when I was in Puerto Rico, I learned that after Hurricane Maria, libraries they had mold. So, you had health hazards there, institutions not opening up. There's no electricity. The buildings are hot, or they're hot and humid. And so, because of Hurricane Maria, you have disruptions to communications, you have disruption to energy, you have disruption to the roads. And so, people can't travel. And so, all these different layering, you know, impacts could definitely devastate libraries.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: This of course has an outsized impact on the communities these libraries support.

Crystal Felima: And many of us know that the libraries can be everything for a community. I grew up in South Carolina. My town was about 2,000 people, but everyone loves—we would go to the library in the summer. It was a small, little building. But that's, you know, that was our cultural institution. So, for many of us, the libraries continue to be places [where] not only do we learn, but we apply for jobs and, you know, we do all these different activities at the library. But a disaster could impact people, the resources, that keep the library functioning.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Libraries are often at the heart of communities and can play a role in helping them respond to and recover from emergencies. They can double as cooling stations in life-threatening [heat waves](#), and places to keep warm in the freezing winter. After [Superstorm Sandy](#), libraries served as both official evacuation centers and unofficial ones, providing the public with a place to charge devices and contact friends and family.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: What tips do you have for libraries and cultural heritage institutions who may be preparing for disasters?

Crystal Felima: The advice I would give for libraries and other institutions is to plan. We may want to call our state or local emergency management office to have conversations about what planning looks like. You can call FEMA, we can come help, do a little video conference. But I think it's important for libraries to really think about if there is a threat, what does that look like? So, it doesn't have to be a planning for... Oh, we need to plan for hurricane, we need to plan for, you know, a fire. But it could just be let's plan for if we have a disruption to all of our electricity or you know, if we have a plan if we have a reduction in staff. Thinking about partnerships and how do we create ways to collaborate and coordinate with each other? That is super important. I think there has to be additional ways in which institutions and community organizations are talking, but also creating plans. Deliberate plans, proactive plans, to really think about ways in which collaboration can reduce the risk.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: When it comes to emergency planning, there are clear benefits to coordinating within your community and connecting with national or global partners. There can also be benefits to collaboration between different libraries. Digitization, for instance, can be an important insurance for physical collections, but is complicated and expensive. Collaboration with an institution with the experience or infrastructure to support these efforts can be enormously beneficial. However, there are also many factors that need to be considered when establishing these relationships, particularly when there is an uneven balance of wealth or power.

Crystal Felima: Well, I think libraries who have the capabilities and capacity to be at the forefront of the collaboration--super important. And when I say that, I'm thinking in a very horizontal relationship, right? Kind of what that looks like in a social justice framework, right? We don't want to have a situation where we have, you know, a [research one institution](#) who is acting like, you know, the parent to libraries in the Caribbean, right?

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Crystal pointed to the University of Florida, where she did her postdoc, and their work with libraries in the Caribbean as a model for what these partnerships between institutions with different levels of access to resources could look like.

Crystal Felima: We have to have these partnerships where there's collaboration, you know, amongst everyone. And there's planning and input from everyone. But the University of Florida and a Research One institution can serve as providing different resources. Whether that is funding, could be people, could be a data scientist or technicians or metadata librarians. Or, you know, graduate students who may be willing to ask libraries and institutions in the Caribbean, or like, you know, "What do you need? What capabilities do you have? How can we support those capabilities?" And so, I think that the institutions that have a little bit more money to work with—they could set aside, you know, grants or provide virtual training because cultural memory and digital memory and cultural artifacts, all of that is should be shared amongst our community,

shared amongst everyone. And so, I think if we are thinking in that way, we might be able to support, you know, more organizations.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: In particular, she recommended dLOC or the [Digital Library of the Caribbean](#) as a model. The project's website describes it as "a cooperative digital library for resources from and about the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean." Crystal herself was involved with a dLOC working group and has contributed photos of Haiti to its collections.

Crystal Felima: I think dLOC is a really great example of looking at how social justice and the library works, where you have different partners collaborate, they share resources, you have their institution like the University of Florida who provides the data hub. You have Florida International University who provides the administrative support, and you have this working relationship where institutions are in conversations with each other, whether they're in Haiti and Puerto Rico. People know each other, people can create grants and have conversations about what that looks like. So, I think that that's a great example of how partnerships and collaboration in social justice work, because there isn't this like power grab. Not that I saw [laugh]. I didn't see that as a postdoc.

[Pause/music]

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Crystal has studied disaster narratives and she's collected, curated, and created them. Today through her work at FEMA, she's still involved, only now she's also part of the story, and has some influence on how it could unfold.

Crystal Felima: I guess that training as an anthropologist and that training as an Africana studies scholar has just really provided me a lens to approach my work as a federal employee. So not only am I'm thinking about questions that may impact my actions, but I'm also actively thinking about ways in which the mission of FEMA—you know, to, to help others to be at the forefront of kind of the coordination and collaboration with other federal partners, and how do we help Americans—I'm thinking about that in a very critical way and in critical terms. What does that look like for, you know, the most marginalized groups in the United States? I think because of that training in anthropology, Africana studies, my lens is always thinking about you know, how do we be more conscientious of the work that we do?

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: And this lens also helps Crystal think about very nature of the disasters she works with.

Crystal Felima: I do not use the term natural disaster. You know, the earthquake in Haiti couple years back that killed over a hundred thousand people. Like that was a natural occurrence. If that happened in California, the death toll would be dramatically different. This pandemic is not a natural disaster, because if we look at our cases versus, you know, New Zealand, thinking about how politics can structure, you know, preparedness and action and response, the outcome can be very different.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Whether or not natural hazards become “disasters” depends on how human populations prepare for and respond to them. In the case of disasters linked to the climate crisis, their increased magnitude and frequency is something that we caused, and there’s nothing natural about that.

I had one final question for Crystal.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: And do you think that preserving culture plays a role in resilience?

Crystal Felima: Oh absolutely [laughs]. I think understanding culture and understanding the human experience and the many facets of human experience, people become more resilient. They understand their power, they understand their agency, they understand helping other people. What I’m trying to say is that I think if people understand culture, they will understand and appreciate other human beings. The vulnerability and risk, I mean, it would still be there, but I think that the way humans respond to threats would be very different.

I think it’s important for us to always be connected to culture, always be connected to humans, always be connected to the human experience. And not only that, but I think about learning of other cultures by scholars or librarians who digitize or provided ways in which people see the cultural memory. So, I think that, you know, it’s so important for future generations to know more about the human experience.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: That was our guest Dr. Crystal Felima. You can learn more about Crystal’s work on her website, crystalfelima.com, or find select works by her on our website at material-memory.clir.org.

In our next episode, we’ll be talking with Dr. Victoria Hermann, president and managing director of The Arctic Institute, about displaced communities and cultural resilience.

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I’m your host, Nicole Kang Ferraiolo, and this is *Material Memory*.