

S2 E4
Climate Displacement and Cultural Resilience
Transcript

Victoria Herrmann: When a community is displaced, what you lose are both things that you see and things that you can't see—or can't even foresee—being lost.

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

Between [150 to 300 million people](#) could be displaced by the climate crisis globally by the year 2050. To give a sense of the scale of these numbers, the United States has a population of about 330 million people. Taking the low end of these estimates, 150 million, it would be as if 45% of people in the US were to lose their homes. The high end, 300 million people displaced worldwide, is equivalent to 90% of the US population. It goes without saying that when it comes to climate change and cultural memory, this is a *big* topic, and one that will come up again and again over the remainder of this season. We'll get into what this looks like in different geographic and cultural contexts, but we thought we'd start today by looking at displacement here in the US, where CLIR and this podcast are located.

In this episode, I spoke with Dr. Victoria Herrmann about what climate displacement means for US communities, and about climate policy and cultural heritage.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: So, let's start off by having you introduce yourself.

Victoria Herrmann: Sure. My name is Victoria Herrmann and I'm the managing director of the Arctic Institute and an assistant research professor at Georgetown University. My research focuses mainly on the intersection of climate change and cultural heritage, and specifically how we can adapt cultural heritage to the climate impacts that we can no longer avoid and also use cultural heritage in resilience against those impacts

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: If you live in the West and you hear about climate displacement, there's a decent chance the image that comes to mind will be of transnational refugees, probably in a boat somewhere off the coast of Europe. This has been the [dominant](#), and at times [damaging](#), narrative in the Western media. However, most climate displacement results in [internal migration](#), that is to say, people moving within their own countries. I asked Victoria what climate displacement is likely to look like in the US.

Victoria Herrmann: So, climate change is currently and will continue to be the biggest catalyst for internal displacement, migration, and relocation to new home communities, and the United States isn't immune to those global numbers that we see for climate displaced persons: wildfires, hurricanes, inland flooding, all create displaced communities.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: It's estimated that in the US, [13 million people](#) (about 4% of the total population) will be displaced just from coastal sea level rise alone. Since 2016, over a million disaster-related displacements have occurred in the US [each year](#).

Victoria Herrmann: In 2019 alone, there were 14 \$1 billion disasters—from inland flooding in the Midwest to hurricanes in the Southeast. Each of these extreme weather events displaced communities, some temporarily and some permanently. And this is mostly what climate displacement in America does and will look like in the future.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Displacement from extreme weather events is already happening and has been for a while. Hurricane Katrina, which we'll talk about in a later episode this season, happened over *fifteen* years ago. There are communities today that see the writing on the wall and don't want to wait for disasters to strike.

Victoria Herrmann: In the United States, there are currently 13 communities that are seeking active relocation. So, moving away from the coast, from an eroding river, further inland, and those communities are in Louisiana, in the state of Washington, and in Alaska.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: So, in your opinion, what do you think is at risk of being lost when a community must relocate?

Victoria Herrmann: So, we lose things like our historic, the places that we have come to love that we've passed down from one generation to the next, maybe that historic lighthouse or a public square that you gather for cultural festivals and holidays. But you also lose those intangible things that connect you to that place, to the people there, and to the histories that are embedded all around you. You might lose the opportunity to plant tomatoes in the summer and that same garden that your grandmother and your great grandmother planted in. You might miss that connection with your neighbors, when you go on vacation and you need someone to water your plants or pick up your kids and you call up your neighbor. You miss that social cohesion—that connection of people that make that place so important to you.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: I asked Victoria if she could share some specific examples she's encountered of cultural losses by communities facing climate displacement.

Victoria Herrmann: In the Native village of Teller, Alaska on the Westernmost coast, the graveyard is right up against the eroding shoreline and Teller is one of 31 villages in Alaska that the US Army Corps of engineers has identified as being in need of relocation away from the coastline. If they relocate, they can't bring that graveyard where generations past have been buried. They'll lose that connection to that land, but also to the ancestors that are buried there.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: According to Victoria, we're also seeing the loss of intangible heritage.

Victoria Herrmann: When a community like the native village of Shishmaref moves seven miles inland, they're no longer on that ground where they have had fishing camps for centuries, where they have lived with the water, not fighting against it. But when you're seven miles inland from that water, you can't launch a boat. You can't go out on the ice easily. You lose that connection and you ultimately lose those intangible traditions that come along with that spiritual and physical connection to land and sea.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Victoria's own family has a history of displacement.

Victoria Herrmann: My grandparents are both Holocaust survivors, and I grew up hearing stories of how they once lived in a strong cultural community in Germany that was ripped apart. My grandfather survived Auschwitz concentration camp, but he watched his brother die on a death march. He watched his parents die, and nearly every branch of our family tree was exterminated in the 1940s. When Auschwitz was liberated, he was again displaced to France to a refugee camp. And eventually he made his way to the United States where he met my grandmother who had been hidden away in the United Kingdom during the Holocaust. And eventually also made the transatlantic trip into America to find a new home.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: As a descendent of Holocaust survivors, Victoria is acutely aware of the importance of preserving the culture and memories of displaced communities.

Victoria Herrmann: Hearing these stories growing up of displacement of forced relocation, of this migration to a new homeland, it made me value the concept of a cultural community, of social cohesion, but also of this idea that you can pass down from one generation to the next your traditions, your histories, your heritage, even in the face of forced displacement, and how important those things are to resilience—to bouncing back after shock events happen in your new home. We, over the course of the past 75 years, have seen lots of shock events in New York, in New Jersey where my family settled, and in every one of those extreme events, like Hurricane Sandy, we were able to bounce back because of those close-knit bonds, because of the traditions that brought our community together. And all of those originally came from Germany through that displacement, that relocation, that migration, and that really resonates with my work today. And I think it provides a personal motivation to work hard to make that connection between climate change and cultural heritage.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Can you talk a little bit about what some of these mechanisms are for passing down this cultural heritage and preserving it?

Victoria Herrmann: For me, I see three biggest support mechanisms for passing down cultural heritage in the face of climate change. I think about dwellings—physical spaces that we can practice uplift and pass down our culture. I think of spaces for dialogue between cultures, of past lessons of resilience and how we can combine them and be more sustainable in the future together. And then the third one is documentation.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: The documentation of heritage can take many forms. It can be photographs of historic places or 3-D scans of monuments; it's audio recordings of songs and videos of festivals; it's writing down those family recipes and capturing relatives' stories.

Victoria Herrmann: In climate change, just like in any disaster, there is loss and damage that cannot be avoided. No matter how much we reduce greenhouse gases today, there will still be cultural loss and heritage damage across the world. The documentation of that heritage means that the memory of that historic site, that tradition, is not lost and you can pass it down. And there, I think about my own family's history too. How my grandfather's story was documented in the [Shoah, an audio and visual history of the Holocaust](#). And I can go online today to YouTube

and watch three hours of him talking about his cultural community of my family's life in Germany. That documentation is so important for me to understand where I and my family came from and what I'm building upon.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: [Victoria](#) has been active in climate policy and written extensively on the topic. She's testified before the U.S. Senate, served as the Alaska review editor for the [Fourth National Climate Assessment](#), and in 2019 was named one of the 100 most influential people in climate policy worldwide by [Apolitical](#).

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: So, question for you, do you feel as though existing or proposed climate policy calls for an adequate investment in preserving cultural heritage in the climate crisis?

Victoria Herrmann: Over the past few years, there has been increasing attention paid to the work of cultural heritage to create a more resilient world and the need for funding for cultural heritage conservation and preservation in the face of climate change. But we were starting from the basement when we should have been starting from the fifth floor a few years ago. And we absolutely do not yet exist in a space where cultural heritage is adequately funded, adequately uplifted in a position of leadership in climate policy and in climate negotiations, as it should be.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: So why should cultural heritage be at the forefront when thinking about climate policy?

Victoria Herrmann: No matter what you are talking about in climate policy, cultural heritage is not only a part of the solution, but it should be leading the solutions and invested in that way. We know that cultural heritage in all its forms—indigenous and traditional knowledges, archaeological knowledges, right, our family understandings of what makes us resilient as cultural communities—is all critical to understanding how we can best document loss and damage, how we can best adapt our communities to an increasingly warmer world, and also how we can mitigate, reduce our greenhouse gases.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Climate change will have a disproportionate impact on [Indigenous, Black, and other communities of color](#). These are voices that should be centered in policy conversations, yet are far too often [sidelined](#). When we talk about cultural heritage and climate policy it's not about some nebulous concept of "Culture" with a capital C, it's about the *specific* cultures and social cohesion of the communities that will be most affected by the crisis.

Victoria Herrmann: We're seeing cultural heritage still be in the tail end of negotiations, in the tail end considerations of policy, where in fact, it should be the overarching framework through which we understand where we've come from, where we are in this particular point in climate policy and in humanity's history, and where we can go based on what cultures, what traditions, what heritage inform our most resilient selves and what informs how we connect to one another and to future generations in a new normal.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Victoria mentioned that when thinking about climate policy, it's important to distinguish between *proactive* and *reactive* approaches to adaptation. Proactive

adaptation means modifications that occur before the impacts of the climate crisis are experienced vs reactive adaptation, which are adjustments in response to damage that has already occurred.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: What do you think proactive adaptation looks like when thinking about cultural heritage?

Victoria Herrmann: Proactive adaptation is not something that we are particularly good at in the United States. Most of our policies are reactive. Proactive adaptation means that before a disaster hits, you are listening to every stakeholder that is impacted by that disaster and that you are creating a plan, you're investing in that plan, and you're implementing that plan all before a sudden or slow onset disaster impacts the day-to-day life of those stakeholders.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: And what do you think the risks are of waiting until the reactive adaptation stage?

Victoria Herrmann: The risk of reactively adapting to climate impacts is losing our cultures, losing our traditions, losing our heritage. For every action that you do not take, the next storm will cause devastation. When you don't act to protect the things that you love, they aren't going to protect themselves. Unfortunately, because of the mismanagement of ecosystems, because the lack of respect for indigenous land management, nature can't do its job and protect the cultural and important historical landscapes around us. It can't protect our communities. It can't make a more sustainable future because we've destroyed our natural capabilities to bounce back from an extreme or a slow onset climate disaster. So that means that humanity has to pick up the slack for what we have failed to do in the past. We have to proactively adapt because when we reactively adapt, there is no way to get the loss and damage back after the storm hits.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: Not all of us are policymakers. But according to Victoria, we still have a role.

Victoria Herrmann: Climate change is everyone's story. And everyone has a part to play in adapting our world to these unavoidable climate impacts and creating a new normal that is sustainable, that's equitable, and that ultimately creates a world that can be different, but better in some ways than what we're living. In the United States, the majority of people now believe that climate change is happening, but less than half of Americans polled believe that climate change will impact them personally. And that frame of mind, that "it's happening, but it won't impact me" is wrong, and it's dangerous. If we can get everyone to understand that no matter where you call home—whether it's the Great Plains or the Great Lakes, it's the mountains or the coast—climate change is already costing billions of dollars in damage and inflicting irreplaceable cultural loss.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: I asked Victoria what advice she had for cultural heritage practitioners who care about the issue of displacement.

Victoria Herrmann: I think the number one thing that museums, libraries, archivists, any practitioner in cultural heritage can do is listen to the cultural community you are serving and

understand what their specific climate need is. I can go on this podcast and say what I think is most important, but cultural communities and displaced communities are not the monolith that we can create a single solution and say, this is the most important thing. Each community has its own vision that is informed by local knowledge, by their own traditional knowledge, by their own passed-down knowledge of what is most important to them. And once you've listened, then find ways to co-create to collaborate and to invest in those visions for the future.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: And what do you think individuals who care about culture, but may not have professional backgrounds in preservation can do?

Victoria Herrmann: I think that people who are interested in culture but may not have a background in preservation can do the same thing: they can ask and they can listen. Because at the end of the day, it doesn't matter who you are. You could be an accountant who loves to go to museums. You can be a historic preservationist. Everyone has the capacity to be a part of our climate change story and our climate change solution by donating their time, their expertise, their ear to listen to what needs to happen next, and be a point of connection between that vision and making it happen. And how you find out what part of that story you play is listening and asking questions to the leaders that you already see around you making a difference.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: We can all find a role for ourselves and add strength to existing movements. Still, it can be hard to keep from getting disheartened, at least for me it is. We now have less than 10 years to prevent [irreversible damage](#) from climate change! I wanted to know about Victoria's relationship with optimism as someone who's spent her career working on the climate crisis.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: So, my final question is, do you consider yourself to be an optimistic person and how has this influenced your approach to your work?

Victoria Herrmann: Do I consider myself to be an optimistic person? That is a really difficult question. I don't know that I consider myself an optimist or a pessimist, but I do strongly feel hope. And I think that that is ultimately what drives my actions around climate change and what keeps me going. And it goes back to my grandparents' story, when I was growing up and I listened to my grandfather's stories of being in Auschwitz concentration camp, of witnessing his parents' death, his brother dying on a death march, going through refugee camps in France and ultimately coming to the United States. And when he got here, he gave back to his community in the fullest sense of the word. At every opportunity he rose up and he contributed to building a really incredible cultural community that I was fortunate enough to be raised in. And if he had hope and he had a vision for a brighter future, even though he saw the darkest corners of humanity, then I can't in good faith think that anything is hopeless, that there is always something that we could do to create a brighter future. And it doesn't mean that I don't feel hopeless and helpless some days because I absolutely do. But that overarching emotion behind feeling hopeful means that there is a point at which we can create a better tomorrow. And that's only possible if not just I keep working all day every day on climate change, but if everyone sees themselves as climate heroes and as part of our collective climate story and ultimately our climate solution—that we're the strongest when we all work together, and hope is brightest when we all come together and rally behind a better future.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: That was our guest Dr. Victoria Herrmann. You can learn more about Victoria's work at theartcticinstitute.org, which we'll link to on our website, material-memory.clir.org.

In our next episode, we'll talk more about displaced communities with Saiful Alam Chowdhury of the University of Dhaka. Specifically, we'll examine the impact of climate change on intangible cultural heritage, or living heritage, and what this looks like in Bangladesh.

If you're interested in learning more about preserving Indigenous cultural heritage, check out the previous season of *Material Memory*, hosted by my colleague Joy Banks. That whole first season focuses on Indigenous language collections and there are some amazing interviews.

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Thanks again for joining us. I'm your host, Nicole Kang Ferraiolo, and this is *Material Memory*.