

S2 E6
The Home of Memory
Transcript

Itza Carbajal: We all know that climate change is going to change our way of life, but it'll hit some of us sooner. It'll hit some of us differently.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Hello and welcome to *Material Memory*, I'm your host, Nicole Kang Ferraiolo. The voice you just heard was our guest, Itza Carbajal. Itza is an archivist and scholar of records and memory. She doesn't consider herself to be a climate change specialist, yet she has become one of the most visible voices in the U.S. archival field speaking out against the climate crisis. In this episode we'll discuss her activism and how her personal experience as a hurricane evacuee has shaped her perspective on records. We'll also talk about Itza's work with vulnerable collections and communities in Latin America and the potential of post-custodialism as an archival response to the climate crisis.

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

Itza Carbajal: Okay. My name is Itza Carbajal. I currently work as the Latin American metadata librarian at the University of Texas at Austin, specifically at LLILAS Benson, which is like our Latin American library as well as a Latin American studies department, but I will then be transitioning this year into a PhD program at the University of Washington here in Seattle, studying at their i-school, still working on archives, memory, specifically children's records.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: A quick note that Itza and I spoke in August 2020, shortly after her move from Texas to Washington state. Itza first came to my attention during the [climate strike teach-ins](#) by archivists in 2019, which were part of the [global climate strikes](#) that took place across 150 countries. I followed the teach-ins on Twitter, and Itza seemed to be everywhere that week, which makes sense, since she co-organized them.

Itza Carbajal: It was a global strike led by youth specifically to bring attention to climate change issues in different countries throughout the world. When I first started talking with my friend, Ted Lee, um, who is at the University of British Columbia, we were like, well, we want to do something in our field. And so we wanted to kind of latch on to the global strike and put our support there and our voices there while also kind of like speaking amongst our own community.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: To organize the climate strike teach-ins, Itza and Ted worked with [Project ARCC](#), a community of Archivists Responding to Climate Change. Together participating archivists held nine in-person events in the US, Canada, and Australia.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: And what were some of the topics that you covered in that?

Itza Carbajal: it was a variety of things. Um, so Ted talked about climate justice and the relationship with archives and how climate change impacts marginalized communities disproportionately. My teach-in topic was around forced obsolescence; from a digital archival perspective, how we're really discouraged from reusing and recycling, because so much of our equipment is really destined just for consumption, and so the topics just really varied and everyone that wanted to have their teach-in listed or event listed, it was totally up to them. After the climate strike, I think we started noticing a little bit more conversations around climate change and archives and our responsibilities as archivists toward some of these issues.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: When you talk to so many of the archivists and librarians who are most visibly working on climate change issues about how they got involved, they tell a similar story. In most cases, they didn't have professional training on environmental issues, but when they looked around, they saw that the field wasn't doing enough, so they stepped up and did it themselves.

Itza Carbajal: Another big message from the climate strikes that I hope was communicated was that you don't have to be a climate change expert to deal with these things. Cause like, as an archivist, as working in archives, cultural memory institution—anything that has information that's pertaining to society's past, present, and future, you already have a responsibility to learn something, cause this is going to impact your work.

[Music]

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Even if Itza didn't have a formal education on climate change, her activism didn't come out of nowhere. In 2005, Itza was one of [273,000 people](#) displaced from her home in New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, which resulted in her family relocating to Texas. She was just fourteen years old. Itza generously offered to speak about the perspective she gained from her personal experience with Hurricane Katrina.

Itza Carbajal: Being a, like, a product of Katrina or Hurricane Katrina definitely influenced my way of looking at memory and records, for sure. I don't think I knew that immediately. But, yeah, I think over the years I've just like recognized the role records played in that experience, um, also the role that records didn't play. So, I lost like

everything. Like, I have like little things. I eventually went into this house that my mom and I had just moved into the day before we evacuated. Like I had always lived in New Orleans, I had never known any other place to be home, and so, like, when that house that we had just moved into got flooded, that was my life, right? Like everything that I had collected, created, was attached to, found value to, was gone.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Itza's experience has also complicated her relationship with records in her role as an archivist

Itza Carbajal: I have like a really split idea of how important records are while also remembering that, like I learned the hard way that like records aren't my memory, but records are just a manifestation of my memories. And so, it's like, I learned that I had to let go of stuff, and so like that's not necessarily the most popular opinion in a field that wants to preserve stuff.

Itza Carbajal: I think I've just been able to develop a really complex opinion around the work we do in order to remember and why we remember and like how it impacts people throughout their lives to have these memories or to have these records that are like the embodiment of that memory, cause like you mentioned, I was 14. I was about to turn 15. I still think I was like a child in many ways, and so like that's contributing now to a lot of my work around, um, children's records, just because it's, I don't know, at one point I, I think the only reason I cried, cried after Katrina, um, was when I realized that like my computer—I didn't have a hard drive, I didn't have flash drives—but like my computer was just completely submerged in water and like all my photos of all my friends were gone. And that's the first thing that actually broke me down was to realize that, that there was no way I was ever going to recover that.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Our records are deeply personal, one of many reasons why they matter.

Itza Carbajal: From my own personal experience with Katrina, without records, you are basically like nobody, and that's really a really, really hard pill to swallow. When I think a lot about like displaced communities who have to evacuate, you know, like mass disasters you know, if they don't have passports, they don't have ID, they don't have medical records.

Itza Carbajal: We all had to like, basically, rebuild our lives, for me, at least—my mom was like very well put together, but I wasn't, I didn't grab any of that. So, if it had been me, I'm not sure I could have enrolled in school cause I didn't have vaccination records. I didn't move to another country, unlike other displacee communities. So, I wouldn't, maybe I wouldn't even be able to travel anywhere, and it's just such an interesting role that records play in our lives as far as being able to get services.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Records also matter for reasons of historical legacy. Archivists are charged with being the stewards of materials that will inform future histories. But when it comes to collecting records of trauma, there are ethical considerations, which Itza knows all too well.

Itza Carbajal: I'm not sure I'm in the place to advocate for collecting after a disaster. Cause there's so many more immediate and pressing issues than saying, Hey, can I do an oral history with you? It just like really ticks me off to think about some things that happened after Hurricane Katrina and how people were struggling financially, physically, emotionally, and then to have not even just cultural heritage institutions, but like even the government, saying like, "Hey, let's like collect all these stories about how we just survived this natural disaster and like let's celebrate our own resilience and blah, blah, blah." And it was just, Hey, people like need a roof. People need food, people need their medicine. We all have mad PTSD. I don't, I don't want you to keep taking more stuff from me and making me process these things for your, like, history gathering projects. It was terrible. It was just absolutely terrible.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Because Hurricane Katrina continues to loom large in people's minds, this experience has never really ended for Itza.

Itza Carbajal: I wasn't one of the people that went back to Katrina or like to New Orleans after Katrina. I stayed in Texas, I just remember like every year—and it happened every year during the anniversary—and like, I get it. I also don't want people to forget about what happened, but it's just like ugh, sometimes it's just not appropriate. You know, some things you like don't ever recover from. I think we do so much work on documenting people who are no longer there and could probably think a little bit more about focusing on them before they leave, and not just when they're no longer there.

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Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Itza's attention to the living people and communities she works with shines through in her work as an archivist. At the time of this interview, Itza was about to begin her PhD and was just wrapping up her job as a metadata librarian at the Latin American Studies and Collections Center at the University of Texas, Austin, called LLILAS Benson.

Itza Carbajal: My institution, LLILAS Benson, has been doing post-custodial projects for a number of years—I don't want to say this wrong, cause I should know this, but I think it's 15 years.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: The [Society of American Archivists](#) describes post-custodial archiving as an "alternative model where records are retained by their creator with archives providing oversight and support functions." So the idea is that instead of

gathering records in Latin America and bringing them back to archives in Texas, UT would support the collections within the communities where they're based, through partnerships and resource sharing.

Itza Carbajal: I think we've at LLILAS Benson have always tried to be very intentional around using post-custodialism as a way to kind of disrupt, uh, this dynamic of us as like an American institution going to Latin America and extracting, or like, what we would say, "acquiring" materials out of their local context.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: In an [article](#) Itza co-authored with Dr. Hannah Alpert-Abrams and David A Bliss, post-custodial work was described as having "a justice-oriented mission and an anti-colonialist ethic." According to the authors, it helps LLILAS Benson to "correct for the long history of colonialist collecting practices in transnational librarianship." In her time at UT-Austin, Itza worked most closely with their partners in Colombia and Brazil.

Itza Carbajal: We have Afro Colombian communities on the very West coast of Colombia. And then we have Quilombolas in Brazil. Their collections are fragile for many reasons. They're under-resourced institutions or groups, mostly because they often were counteracting the government violence towards these communities.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: These communities also happen to be situated in geographic locations that put them and their records at risk due to climate change.

Itza Carbajal: Luckily our partners, they're very aware of the environments that they're in both politically and environmentally. And so for two of the partners—our partners in Brazil, we know them as EAACONE, and then our partners in Colombia, which we know them as [PCN](#)—so both partners are in places in their countries that have the kind of environmental vulnerabilities. So, like, PCN is at the very like far west coast of Colombia. So, it's like super humid, very hot, and we have our partners in Brazil who are a little bit more rural.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Climate is one of several factors already threatening their records.

Itza Carbajal: When we'd go and do sort of like a survey on the condition of the document, so many of them are deteriorating because, one, they're going to naturally deteriorate, but then the conditions in which the environment is just surrounding them. So, like, water in particular is a really big danger. And so even though they themselves are often persecuted by the government for, like, speaking against a lot of the policies that affect their communities, they also are then facing similar dangers, like our institutions that are well-funded, say like in Florida or anywhere else on the coast. But then they're not well-funded, and so they don't have conservation programs or the ability to like transport things out, if there's like an impending hurricane or flood. We look at

post-custodialism as a way to counteract any sort of deliberate attacks by the government to, like, try and erase these particular narratives around the history of a particular country or region.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: In many ways, post-custodial archiving is about resource sharing while trying to subvert traditional power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South. Digital archives can be a mechanism to help these communities preserve records, but they're nowhere near a perfect solution.

Itza Carbajal: We're recognizing that just because we're using post-custodial methods in an effort to not continue extracting physical materials from partners in other countries, that doesn't mean we're not extracting something. We're extracting digital things now, and we're not necessarily providing the resources for our partners to preserve their digital records. We give them some resources, but our training isn't around that, our training is around creating the digital assets. We don't get a chance to go into digital preservation. Like that's beyond the scope of our funding, that's beyond the scope of our timeline.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Digital archives are also more vulnerable than people think.

Itza Carbajal: If we move to the topic of digital archives and preservation, just because it's digital, it doesn't mean that it can't be destroyed by a natural disaster.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: People forget that digital is actually physical somewhere.

Itza Carbajal: It's super physical and sometimes it's even more vulnerable. I'm so afraid right now, with just a spike in heat and electricity. And so, it's like, I don't know if you've ever had a situation where, you know, your server, the electricity just goes out and these servers are pretty sensitive. And it might not happen to, you know, a massive farm, but if we have this backup, we have cold storage at UT. And so, like we have means to be able to preserve stuff in multiple ways and in multiple places, but our partners don't. What happens after you create the digital copies, cause that it doesn't end there, right? Like you said, digital is physical, but digital is also ongoing maintenance. Just because you have a digital copy doesn't mean that your work is done.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Unfortunately, there are too many examples of why digital preservation, as imperfect as it is, still matters.

Itza Carbajal: I don't know if you remember the fire at the Brazilian archive?

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Itza is speaking about the 2018 fire at the National Museum of Brazil, which destroyed 20 million items and over 92% of its archive.

Itza Carbajal: There was this massive effort to try and recreate the collections digitally. And, you know, there's a lot of conversations around not only digital repatriation, it's more like digital reunification. If there had been some intentionality around having digital copies, we could then say, okay, well we can't replicate the whole museum, but we can salvage some things in some ways through these digital copies. And so, I think post-custodialism definitely lends itself very nicely to dealing with the dangers that impact people through climate change.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Storing digital copies of records in different geographic locations can provide an additional layer of preservation security. But we should be careful about assumptions that copies will be safer if stored in the United States.

Itza Carbajal: In Texas, um, and Austin in particular, our heat waves, they're getting worse. Thinking through how that's going to impact our electrical grid and our power sources—so it's like digital archives don't exist in this ether that doesn't depend on other resources. We're also thinking about the cost to electricity, whether electricity is coming from a clean source or a dirty source, like coal. We're not immune from contributing to climate change disaster, and we're also not guaranteed the ability to survive in the case of a climate disaster.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: We put together this episode in February 2021, shortly after the catastrophic winter storms in Texas caused mass power outages and utility failures. While writing this, the full extent of the damage to the lives and homes of the people who live there was still being assessed. It's hard not to see Itza as prescient. While [The University of Texas](#) itself managed to keep the lights on due to a private power plant and grid owned by the school, blackouts at other data centers in Texas caused disruptions both locally and further afield. For instance, the website for the [City of Austin](#) went dark; meanwhile in California, 12 million low-income residents temporarily lost access to their health care portal, because the data for [Medi-Cal](#) was stored in Texas.

Yet, data centers are only a side note in this tragedy. Far more important is that people are suffering, dying, and losing their homes. We're seeing [echoes of Katrina](#), [Harvey](#) and so many examples where existing [inequality is amplified](#), bearing disproportionate impact on [Black, Latino and low-income families](#). There is a lot that memory workers, myself included, can learn from Itza as we think about how to respond to this climate disaster and prepare for more to come.

[Music]

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Climate disasters seemed to bookend this episode. I spoke with Itza in August 2020, shortly before Hurricane Katrina's 15 year anniversary, while [wildfires](#) ravaged my home state of California. We are now releasing it as Itza's second home state of Texas tries to pick up the pieces after the devastating winter storm. The timing is painfully on the nose, yet there have been so many disasters these past couple of years that perhaps this would have felt true to some extent no matter when we scheduled the episode. All this is another way of saying that we need to take action on climate change immediately. Itza has some ideas of things we can do.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo: What are some of the ways information and culture workers can take meaningful action in the face of the climate crisis?

Itza Carbajal: So that's a great question. I hope that by us doing that global climate strike, um, back in 2019, we just kind of like re-sounded the alarm, and that's really kind of the starting point is to take this topic seriously, and to not think that you're immune to it, cause no one, no one on this planet is going to be immune to climate change. And it's going to look differently according to where you are and what you're doing, where you're collecting, who you're working with.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: And memory workers can work with communities to build capacity, so they have more choice in how their story plays out and is ultimately preserved.

Itza Carbajal: Personally, I think I'm a little bit bigger proponent of building capacity for people. So, like, I think of record keeping being just as important as us preserving the record. How can we help communities? We know if we have to, uh, evacuate for a natural disaster. Do they know what they should take? Do they know how to care for it? Simple things where we can build that resilience from the very beginning and not have to do it as a reaction to the fact that we had this disaster, cause it's like for some of us, we know wildfire season, that's a thing; hurricane season, that's a thing, and it's— maybe it's a surprise when it happens, but we know it's going to happen.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: We can take stock how our own actions affect the crisis

Itza Carbajal: I think change can either come internally, so thinking about what your footprint around waste is, if you're at a large institution in particular, whether that's waste through electricity or waste through actual material waste, but also thinking of things outside of your immediate community. So that could be everything from, like, contacting your like local legislator, and thinking about how cultural memory institutions, government records, getting access to environmental studies, making sure that those records are getting preserved.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Memory workers also have a role in how we communicate and understand climate change.

Itza Carbajal: We have to understand climate change, but we have to have access to the information to understand climate change. We also have to advocate for that information to be accessible to the public. There are still people who will deny that this is a thing. We have to really think about how our records impact the work around trying to improve the outcomes of climate change.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: When thinking about this work, it can be helpful to keep some perspective.

Itza Carbajal: We owe it to the next generation to be able to, like, do what we can for them to live just as meaningful lives as we have been able to live. And so the global strike was just, I think, for me really important as a way to call attention to say like, Hey, whatever you're doing, I'm sure it is important. I'm sure that you have a lot of work to do. Um, but like, we need to stop what we're doing and go outside and talk to our neighbors or talk to our colleagues or hear from other people who have been doing maybe deeper work around climate change, and like just take this serious.

Itza Carbajal: If you continue to do the work, continue to call attention to this issue, that's really all I could ask for. I don't think the archival field's gonna solve climate change, but like we could definitely contribute together to whatever sort of solutions are necessary. I don't think there's also one solution. There will need to be many solutions, and we just need to recognize that we have a role in that, even though we may not think we do, and we also have a responsibility to find that role.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Climate change is personal, and sometimes, finding our role means coming to terms with how it affects the things that matter most to us.

Itza Carbajal: We all know that climate change is going to change our way of life, but it'll hit some of us sooner. It'll hit some of us differently. Climate change—as I grew up and kind of understood that it wasn't just about, you know, saving the animals, which is really important to me also, but saving people's lives, and their way of life—it's just, yeah, it's core. Like, there's no separation between my memory work and my climate change interests.

Nicole Kang Ferraiolo narration: Thank you to our guest, Itza Carbajal. You can learn more about Itza's work and the sources cited in this episode on our website, material-memory.clir.org. We'll also link to some resources Itza shared on [mutual aid groups in Texas](#) that you can support.

In our next episode, we'll be speaking with Dr. Blessing Non-ye Onyima about the impact of climate change on heritage in Nigeria and the importance of political and historical contexts. We'll be discussing her research on museums and her anthropological fieldwork with cattle nomads in Southwestern Nigeria. We hope you'll join us.

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