A Study Abroad during Covid-19

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In February 2021, my seminar went on a study abroad.[1] We went for free to Jamaica and Malaysia and circled back for a quick tour of our home base, Los Angeles. Our portal was a winter garden, and our pathway was lined with palms. I say my seminar "went" on a study abroad because I didn't take them to these places. What my students saw took us.

Figure 1: Abroad at home

Source: Gather.town. February 2021. Photograph taken by the author.

It turned out to be a kind of road trip, with several planned stops and some surprise encounters. Our palm pathway, instead of functioning as a mere background element or a simple means of travel and transition, itself ended up becoming a focus of the trip. That's not because the road as passageway inevitably entails a more radical sense of agency or self-liberation for the driver. Roads can not only open up new possibilities but also give rise to restrictions and problems of their own (see, among

1 Many thanks to Salena Lo and Akela Morinaka for initiating this trip, as well as Donatella Della Ratta, Jan Distelmeyer, Rembert Hüser, Todd Presner, and Axel Volmar for their helpful ideas and comments.

others, Laderman 2002; Mills 2006; Archer 2016). "The psychological basis for driving seems to be deeply engrained in the pleasure of undergoing the experience of a total road situation with constraints and frustration on one hand and the flow and joy of movement on the other hand. We experience the drive as something that is not completely in our control, but rather 'draws us in' … and drives us" (Fuchs 2019, 20; see also Gadamer [1960] 1989). Instead of attempting to replicate or comprehensively recount the trip that we took in this class (and that took us), one can consider how a different means of revisiting it, through these pages, reconstructs it anew via the experience of reading. This itinerary would include routes that were planned out in advance and disorienting detours that were not: from recent changes to our home environments and overlooked histories of slide technologies to newly designed digital winter gardens with palms, hybrids, and netherworlds and opportunities to get lost—here as well as at home, in class, and on campus—along the way.[2]

Our trip took place in a seminar titled Media Environments and German Palm Tree Dreams. Environments had been on our minds that past year anyway—in terms of not only the ecological crisis on both sides of the Atlantic but also our classrooms, where we all sit around in a grid like in the opening credits of *The Brady Bunch*. Many homes still at home (fig. 1). So, we began to think about the changes taking place to our very own surroundings. Some of these emphasized the extent to which environments regulate the conditions of possibility for producing and acquiring knowledge in the first place. Institutions called the emergent shift to "remote instruction" (not "online learning") a "pivot," implying that the central pillars and values around which we work would remain the same amid this swift but temporary turn to something new.[3] Yet it soon became clear that knowledge changes when instructors "pivot" from modeling it on a whiteboard in a classroom to devising a makeshift apparatus for it out of a shower wall, magic markers, and buckets propped up on a toilet (fig. 2).

2 "Means of transport have the characteristic feature of integrating their user into a collective of human and non-human actants. Thus, anyone who transports or allows themselves to be transported is also inevitably transformed" (Imhof 2014, 21–22, translation KM).

3 "'Online learning' will become a politicized term that can take on any number of meanings depending on the argument someone wants to advance. … Online learning carries a stigma of being lower quality than face-to-face learning, despite research showing otherwise. These hurried moves online by so many institutions at once could seal the perception of online learning as a weak option, when in truth nobody making the transition to online teaching under these circumstances [the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic] will truly be designing to take full advantage of the affordances and possibilities of the online format" (Hodges et al. 2020).

Figure 2: Draft tripods

Source: Lorraine, Lisa. 2020. "#quarantine #teachersoftiktok #desperatetimes #biology #innovation." TikTok video, 00:09. April 7, 2020. Screenshot. https://www.tiktok.com/@lisa.tomato/video/6813185032732167430.

Other changes highlighted aspects of our physical environments we had yet to notice or fully understand. While in March 2020 we might have been searching out pro tips for controlling and curating the look of our homes during video conferencing sessions, a year later many were growing tired and skeptical of this attempt to approximate the environment of in-person learning, especially if this idea of organized space and authoritative knowledge was a fantasy to begin with. New and improved how-to videos surfaced, offering some guidance (fig. 3).

> I want my students, when they log on to my class, to feel like they're walking right into a professor's office on campus. It would be really tempting to get a

bookshelf and put it in here [this spare bedroom] and put all the books in neatly, but that wouldn't look like a professor's office at all. … It's not just books. … You gotta have file folders. … It's not a book*shelf*, it's book *stack*. … Ok, the next thing you gotta have is half a ream of printer paper. … [A]nd you just wanna stick it there [on the bed] because sometimes you gotta use that to print quizzes right before a class. OK, so you can see how I have a whiteboard here and I've written what we're gonna do today in class? And that's great, but it'd be better if what I have written on the board looks like the ravings of a lunatic. … We're trying to go for authenticity here. … Listen, being in your office is not all work. … I've got a bunch of random packets of things that imply that I've eaten many lunches in here. And we're just gonna take those and sprinkle those on the bed. … Yeah, I think this is looking pretty good. I think this looks just like a professor's office. If a student were to log on, they'd feel like they're just right on campus, with me. (Ishak 2020)

Figure 3: Office life

Source: Ishak, Andrew. 2020. "Making Your Zoom Look More Professorial." Video, 5:46. August 13, 2020. Screenshot. https://vimeo.com/447645552.

If a real, "professorial" bookshelf is often a real mess, why try to reenact a fictional version on of it on Zoom?[4] And besides, the "asymmetry of knowledge" it once reinforced between professor and student is no longer applicable (Hüser 2020).[5]

4 Concerns about being seen in one's own messy, disorganized environment were some of the first public reactions to early forms of video conferencing, such as the *Picturephone* introduced at the 1964 World's Fair: "There were wry comments about mothers telephoning their daughters and clucking in disapproval of the disheveled state of the daughter's hair and apartment" (Fang 1997, 147). See also Katz and Crocker (2017).

5 "The discussion about whether or not a professor should have their picture taken in front of a wall of books is as old as the hills. In any case, the wall of shelves full of books no longer

Some of these changes to our home environments ultimately called for a historicization of their newness, such as the emergence of the concept of the interior in the nineteenth century and how it has long since been repurposed in various ways, or how the bed as a hybrid private/public space, media platform, and control center for networked communication was not that new.[6]

Our class discussed Zoom as a format and possible alternatives to this model of communication in times of remote learning, such as *Second Life*, Kumospace, *Minecraft*, and Gather.town, that last of which we extensively explored during one of our sessions.[7] Since presentations on Zoom usually involve a PowerPoint in "share screen" mode, I was intrigued when the first group presentation wanted to go somewhere else. A PowerPoint typically shows content and information that has already been synthesized. This was not always the fate for shared, projected presentation technologies. Joseph Licklider, for example, envisioned networked computers in specialized work settings in the 1960s as a means of modeling thinking in communal presentations rather than explaining it. Media technologies were to assist in opening up a communication process rather than projecting a finished idea or product. For Licklider,

> the computer opened up entire new possibilities: as a 'plastic or moldable medium that can be modeled [as] a dynamic medium,' it is especially suited for presenting to others how someone imagines something and, likewise in a unique way, it also allows for a common idea of something to be developed . … [Presentations via computers in this context] were thus imagined less as a representation of static bundles of knowledge than as a flexible medium for interactive processes of cooperative model discovery. It was from this basis that

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has anything to do with the asymmetry of knowledge that can be seen in earlier depictions of scholars, now that many people prefer to have their books on their USB drives. At the university, meanwhile, there is actually more of a fear of the bookshelf, and there has been for years. The university now wants to appear more relaxed to the outside world; it needs this for its Third Mission programs. A wall of books, on the other hand, has something dusty about it; no one 'lives' there" (Hüser 2020, translation KM). See also Fetters (2020a).

6 See Patton (2020, 13–23, 123–29) and Colomina (2014). "In what is probably now a conservative estimate, *The Wall Street Journal* reported in 2012 that 80 percent of young New York City professionals work regularly from bed. … Post-industrialization collapses work back into the home and takes it further into the bedroom and into the bed itself. Phantasmagoria [of the interior] is no longer lining the room in wallpaper, fabric, images, and objects. It is now in the electronic devices. The whole universe is concentrated on a small screen with the bed floating in an infinite sea of information. To lie down is not to rest but to move. The bed is now a site of action" (Colomina 2014, 19). See also Benjamin ([1955] 1978).

7 "The ubiquity of the [Zoom] software has resulted in genericization, with many using the word 'Zoom' as a verb to replace videoconferencing, similar to 'Googling'" (Bailenson 2021).

> the problematic transition could take place, for instance, into the pedagogical context. (Pias 2020, 294, 296)[8]

Given the then-high cost of this model of thinking via a shared network of computers, and given the relative affordability of overhead transparencies, the latter led the way in pedagogical presentation practices. PowerPoint was first created as a means of printing these overhead transparencies and only later as a form of designing and projecting the presentation itself (see Pias 2020, 296–99).

Thus, although there were presentation technologies related to the history and development of PowerPoint that were originally conceived as interactive formats for modeling thinking and for work that is collaborative and creative, in the educational context of today, the default PowerPoint often displays sequentially organized material presented through bullet points, summaries, graphics, and performative oration (see Coy and Pias 2009; Robles-Anderson and Svensson 2016; Knoblauch 2008; Tufte 2003; Frommer [2010] 2012). While one person speaks, the whole group listens and epigraphically reads:

> Reading PowerPoint is wall reading, is group reading, is synchronous reading, is semipublic reading. … In the sweaty, hormone-steeped conference room, when all eyes are on the PowerPoint presenter with his or her slides dissolving from one to the next, the emphasis is on group, consensus, team, collaboration, comprise, unity. … The slides externalize the *truth* and allow the audience to analyze it separately, but simultaneously, from what the speaker is saying *about the same truth*. The slide is not simply an opinion, it is a written artifact on a wall owned in common by all in the room—even if, as is usually the case, the speaker wrote the words in the first place. (Gold 2002, 260)

One of the most distinctive features that we've come to learn about Zoom presentations over the past few years is how they tend to rely on prearranged interaction. With all but one face muted, the presentation doesn't even require nonverbal affirmation from the group anymore. The flow of the speaker's "verbal gloss," necessary for "illuminat[ing]" the material on the slides and for the unifying ritual of PowerPoint, is no longer interrupted by the speaker accidentally standing in front of the projected information or distracting listeners by fiddling around with the interface to move from one slide to the next (Gold 2002, 259–66). In "shared screen" mode on Zoom, the presentation interface can appear more seamless than before—as long as

8 "An illustration in one of Licklider's texts from 1968, for instance, shows a group of bridge builders (although the text itself is concerned here with tactical combat). … One of the participants is giving a presentation on a large screen, while the others are sitting at networked computers, where they can work on things, look things up, make improvements, or also simply play around" (Pias 2020, 294).

everyone else is muted. The standard Zoom sayings about noise, disruptions, and uncertainty indicate how common such occurrences are and how accustomed to them we've become.[9] We all know that one person who always forgets to mute themselves and can imagine what would happen if this person were everywhere at once (fig. 4).

Figure 4: A friendly reminder

Source: Saturday Night Live. 2020. "Zoom Church." YouTube video, 3:08. May 9, 2020. Screenshot. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYP1mXqiwqc.

> Pastor/Presenter: "The way that the Zoom machine works is that every mic is as loud as mine, so when y'all respond, I can't really hear myself preach. Amen?"
> Congregation/Audience, all with mics on: "Amen!" …
> Pastor/Presenter: "Why are y'all still not on mute … Stop. Answering. Me." (Saturday Night Live 2020, fig. 4)

9 "The titles of the sections in th[is] *not paper* are intended to remind us all of how imperfect video conferencing systems are, and of the huge limitations they impose on us" (Lindley et al. 2021). The section titles contained in this academic "not paper" include the following: "YOU'RE ON MUTE" / "PLEASE WAIT FOR THE HOST TO START THIS MEETING" / "HANG ON A SECOND … I'LL JUST SHARE MY SCREEN" / "ARE YOU THERE? CAN YOU HEAR ME?" / "PEOPLE ARE STARTING TO ARRIVE NOW," and "THAT AWKWARD FACE PEOPLE DO AS THEY SEARCH FOR THE 'LEAVE MEETING' BUTTON" (Lindley et al. 2021). On these moments of "disturbance" within protocological networks, see Distelmeyer, in this volume, and Galloway (2004). On how such awkward "lapses" can work against teleological notions of technological progress, see Della Ratta, in this volume.

Call-and-response is not what this platform is designed to facilitate. The literal and figurative noise that interferes when Zoom faces that are meant to remain silent suddenly turn on, lighting up with a bright green outline and reconfiguring the arrangement of other faces in the room, is an indicator of the residual extralinguistic cues we usually rely on to enable the flow of verbal communication and the real incongruity that persists behind this interface function.[10] When others do get a chance to unmute and talk among themselves in Zoom, it's often when the presentation dissolves into smaller groups in sedentary breakout rooms (fig. 5). The first group presentation in our class took us out of the Zoom PowerPoint pastor-grid-slideshow that elicits predetermined outcomes, consensus, and unity and into a very different kind of grid.

Figure 5: Chatter boxes

Source: Bell, Taryn. 2021. "Do Students Hate Online Breakout Rooms?" Twitter, March 18, 2021, 1:47 a.m. https://twitter.com/tarynlbell/status/1372469644997619715.

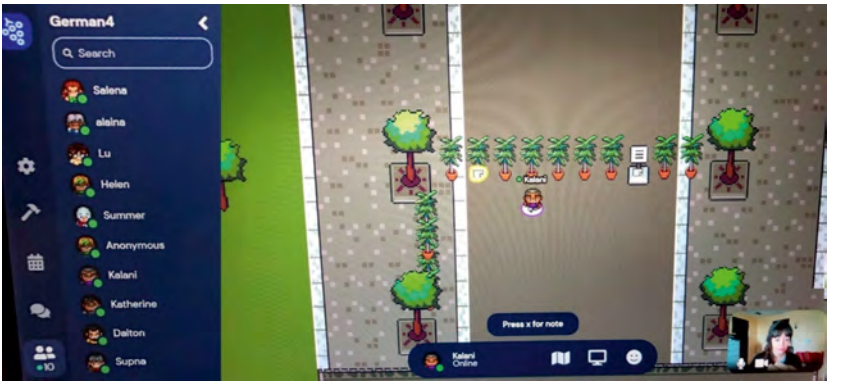
10 See Fetters (2020b), "The Importance of Pauses in Conversation" (2017), and Bailenson (2021). The nonverbal cues received on Zoom, moreover, can easily be misinterpreted. "In a face-to-face meeting, a quick, sidelong glance where one person darts their eyes to another has a social meaning. … In Zoom, a user might see a pattern in which on their grid it seems like one person glanced at another. However, that is not what actually happened, since people often don't have the same grids. Even if the grids were kept constant, it is far more likely the glancing person just got a calendar reminder on their screen or a chat message. Users are constantly receiving nonverbal cues that would have a specific meaning in a face-to-face context but have different meanings on Zoom. While of course people do adapt to media over time … it is often difficult to overcome automatic reactions to nonverbal cues" (Bailenson 2021).

We met that day on Zoom, as always, having read two texts for that session: in this case, sections of Krista Thompson's *An Eye for the Tropics* and Simryn Gill and Michael Taussig's *Becoming Palm* (2017), which thematize the relationship between European colonization and the environment in Jamaica and Malaysia, respectively. Akela Morinaka and Salena Lo were presenting and let us know that they had created their own Gather.town space to explore these texts. Gather, as the platform would like to be abbreviated, is a browser-based video conferencing app, free for up to 25 people, integrated into a virtual map based on templates that you, the participant, can customize ("classroom," "rooftop party," "keynote," etc.) or freely assemble. Its 2D layout and pixilation make it feel like a retro 8-bit video game (see Metz 2020). As you move through the space via an avatar and arrows keys, you meet up with others. This is where it gets interesting. When you come within a few steps of someone, a tiny video display pops up at the top of your screen, enabling a chat between the two of you (see Jacobs and Lindley 2021). More can join if they're within reach. Or you can just pass by each other without entering a video call. You can choose with whom you want to talk, directly and outside of randomly assigned breakout rooms. You can also join a video call at designated spaces, such as a large classroom table, with anyone who happens to be seated there. This means that when this environment is employed as a classroom, for example, questions and answers no longer need to be solely directed at and channeled through the instructor as mediator as they might in a Zoom session in gallery view. Instead, this setup allows for learning opportunities to be initiated and had by multiple "players" or operators in multiple locations, even simultaneously, with or without the instructor being present (see McClure and Williams 2021, 8). This is one of the main appeals of the platform: the possibility for surprise conversations and encounters that can nevertheless remain private.[11] It's a space in which you can upload and pick up Word documents, write on a blackboard, make poster sessions, and watch films that you curate on TV sets.

I asked Akela and Salena to do what I did before I took them to Gather.town for the first time—namely, to give us the plan before we left Zoom: what our virtual map would look like; where we should meet up in the space, when, and for how long; what our activities would be, and so on. "You'll see," they said. "Just follow the palms." It wasn't long before I lost my way—and my students.

11 See Lee (2020) and Latulipe (2021). "[Gather.town] combines role-playing, game mechanics and video conferencing. It is nostalgic, contemporary and futuristic. It brings people together at a distance. It taps into our desire to share social spaces. It facilitates serendipitous encounters" (Lindley et al. 2021).

Figure 6: Environmental signage



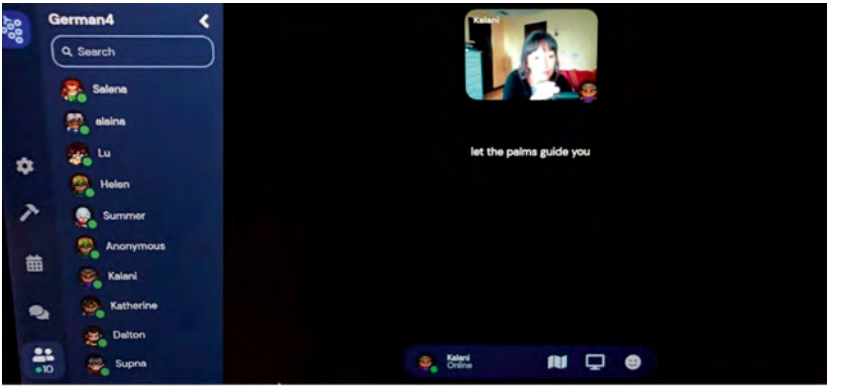
Source: Gather.town. February 2021. Photograph taken by the author.

After entering my name and turning on my mic and camera, my randomly assigned avatar transported me to a digital winter garden, where I was surrounded by a group of avatars labeled with my students' names. *Great, we all made it.* They started running in one direction, so I slowly tagged along, wanting to make sure everyone made it into the platform and knew where to go. I hit a line of palms and went straight to the building in front of me, which I figured would be our virtual classroom, filled with activities. When I entered the main hall, it was empty. *They're fast. They must be in one of the rooms. I'll catch up.* Hurriedly shifting from one arrow key to the next and holding them down in the hope that doing so would speed me up, I navigated the space room by room. Totally empty. I stepped outside and looked around. No one. Or no avatars, at least not in this part of our map. I knew my students were still in the space: I could see them all, their names and avatars, in the Gather.town interface on the left-hand side of my screen. I just didn't know *where* they were in this space. *I'll have to go back and start over. Retrace my steps.*

Returning to where I started, I was relieved to find the first visual clue I must have skipped over in a rush: a note among the palm pathway announcing with a yellow aura that it contained some information to help me navigate this new environment (fig. 6). It's not totally surprising that I missed this way-finding icon, given that "environmental signage is simultaneously there and not there—not really a 'part of' the architecture, yet indispensable to its functions. … Graphic design—signage in particular—is largely a framing activity. … Graphic design is the margins of a book, the buttons of a boom box, the friendliness of a computer interface, or the label wrapping a tin can" (Lupton and Miller 1993, 221). I walked up to the note, clicked it, and was momentarily taken out of the map and into another space (fig. 7). I read there what I had already heard Akela and Selena tell us before we entered the space:

let the palms guide you—simple, no punctuation, no bullet points underneath, an extracted line on a solid black background, my own confusion staring back at me. The moveable avatar and the world it inhabited were completely overtaken in this frame of vision: an extradiegetic space that housed a feedback loop of intrigue and contingency.

Figure 7: Palm guides



Source: Gather.town. February 2021. Photograph taken by the author.

Fortunately, I wasn't lost forever. It just took me a minute to realize that this environment required me to explore it with more curiosity than resolve. I wanted the narrative lesson of the digital environment—*Where do I need to go, and what do I need to do?*—to reveal itself without having first approached it experientially. Rather than following a singular path governed by a lock-and-key system, which requires that operators discover clues and follow prescribed steps in a certain sequence to reach a particular predetermined outcome, the gameplay built into this video conferencing app relies on principles of multiplicity, chance, and emergence.[12] The digital world was more like a sandbox game that participants are asked to wander through and,

12 "In … emergent [video game narratives], there is no prescripted story but rather a system of existents—characters and objects—capable of various behaviors. … When the system contains many existents capable of a variety of actions, and when these actions have side effects for other existents, the system becomes too complex to be predicable, and the stories that it produces acquire a quality of emergence" (Ryan 2016, 339–40). On the "workaround" and improvised readjustment as a response to interference in video conferencing practices from the perspective of media and disability studies, particularly in terms of how interference can be understood not only "as a problem to be solved," but as "a chance to enable situative 'crip' reorderings or productive deviations from the norm," see Bieling et al. in this volume, as well as Schabacher (2017).

if they choose, modify and cocreate using a variety of tools at their disposal. The objective was not to speed-run to the class activity but to observe ourselves and our environment while navigating, which changed how we subsequently engaged with the planned activity.[13] The long, winding path of palms functioned like the opening credits for our course, through which we can't fast-forward.[14]

I eventually found the strategically planted palms, which led me to the building in which my students, as I could tell from the presence and movements of their avatars, were already working. A note at the entrance told us to watch a series of videos that Akela and Salena had created and then enter another building to work on some Google Docs together. I held down the arrow key, walked up to the video, launched it, and saw my face show up next to my students' faces at the top; they were at the same viewing station, each with a miniature version of their avatar anchored to the bottom of their frame, reminding me who was who in the game world (fig. 8). I didn't get that I needed to mute myself upon entering the viewing station, so my sound was blasting into everyone's screens. My students quickly understood, they told me afterward. *Yeah, we just muted you*. There wasn't an assigned sequence, so each of us watched whichever video we wanted first and then moved on at our own pace. They played on loop, and we watched them as we would in a gallery: if we jumped in at the middle, we could see part of it and leave or stay until it looped back to the beginning. This meant that the filmstrip of faces with us at the viewing station was constantly in flux. While technically extracting us from the diegesis of the game world that initially guided us there as an avatar, the videos that were playing constantly referred back to it.[15] We saw each other watching, reacting, taking notes, laughing, arriving in the strip, exploring, getting bored, leaving for the next station, stretching, and taking pictures (fig. 9).

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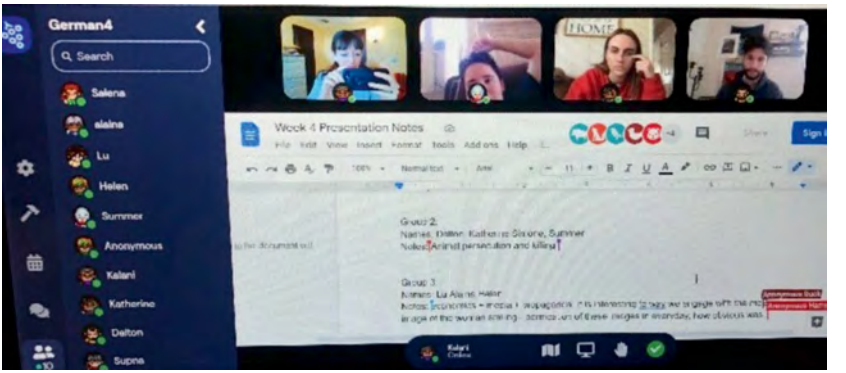
13 On the ways in which the hyper-performativity of the Let's Play format, in which operators simultaneously act (play, move, and make decisions) and reflect on said action, can result in epistemological contingency and productivity, see Leeker in this volume.

14 The string of palms, navigational tactics, and reading strategies at the beginning of this digital world anticipate the logic of the game world and gameplay to come, understood only later as a disordered compilation of individual aspects of this space and gamic acts. See Stanitzek (2006, 8–14; 2009, 47). On what is lost and gained in a walkthrough, see Mukherjee (2016, 64): "Often, as Garry Crawford et al. point out, 'the unavoidable consequence of playing a goal-oriented walkthrough … is the devaluation of socially oriented play' … and the walkthroughs that allow the player to speed through the game often make the basic narrative tools of the game, such as reading the quest descriptions, unnecessary." See also Glas et al. (2011, 149).

15 On diegetic versus nondiegetic gamic actions and instances in which these are difficult to demarcate from one another, see Galloway (2006, 5–38).

Figures 8–9: Facestrips



Source: Gather.town. February 2021. Photographs taken by the author.

The videos at these stations thematized the imaginative geography of the tropics we had read about in our texts, restaging its successive, immersive imagery and descriptive and prescriptive language. We listened to how classificatory tendencies and theories of objectivity transformed fantasies of colonial mastery into environmental realities, how they helped naturalize imperial botanical imports and imagine global origins to be organic. Jamaica, Mayalsia, Europe, Los Angeles. My mind wandered, and I thought about what it meant to be seeing this in a Gather.town configuration rather than in a PowerPoint, the objectivity of information already synthesized. I heard about the grafting and mass migrations of flora and thought about the will to order and standardization:

> Grafting is an agricultural technique that dates back to antiquity. Its major characteristic is that of intervention. Its major advantage is that it provides a short cut

> in reproduction. … Although it [grafting] combines two pieces of plants, that is: two different bodies, it is, by contrast to hybridization, not a fusion of different genetic elements. Grafting involves "the creation of a *compound genetic system* by uniting two (or more) distinct genotypes, each of which maintains its own genetic identity throughout the life of the grafted plant." (Wirth 2014, 233–34; Mudge et al. 2009, 440)

I saw examples of how grafting and graphics create strange juxtapositions and compounds. On a recto of *Becoming Palm*, we read Taussig: "As of this writing my colleague Simryn Gill is becoming an oil palm tree along the Straits of Malacca" (2017, 37 and fig. 10). On the verso, we saw Gill-as-palm, her legs firmly planted on the ground and her hands cradling an object that refused to hold still for the camera (2017, 36 and fig. 10). As I looked at her face, replaced by lively fronds, I looked at my own and how it was framed in the video display, "all mixed up and confusing. … now it's a mess" (Gill and Taussig 2017, 37).[16] It was stitched to a row of other images in side-by-side frames, the bodiless faces of my students in "German4," a course designator relic indicating a phase of institutional transition amid new understandings of geographical copresences and contact zones.[17] As students came and went from the viewing station, the filmstrip at the top of the screen correspondingly shuffled out one face with another, temporarily situating it next to other faces without bodies (fig. 9) or bodies replaced by the tangled limbs of a tree on one of the first British-issued Jamaican stamps (fig. 8). While we learned about and observed the historical transformation of the environmental objects onscreen, we did so while simultaneously observing ourselves and our transformations as pandemic video conferencing participants. I thought about supposedly unadulterated, stable states in pre-this moments and post-that eras and other markers of time that might try to neatly organize its complexity. I listened to how this image on the stamp stirred up debates about whether the environment seemed too Welsh and too universal and how to isolate and typify the landscape. Thought about grafting as an instrument of writing, as a description of the process of writing itself.[18] As a remediation that rejects the

16 "[A] basic characteristic of frame analysis [is] that 'discussions about frame inevitably lead to questions concerning the status of the discussion itself, because here terms applying to what is analyzed ought to apply to the analysis also'" (Stanitzek 2005, 34–35; Goffman 1974, 11).

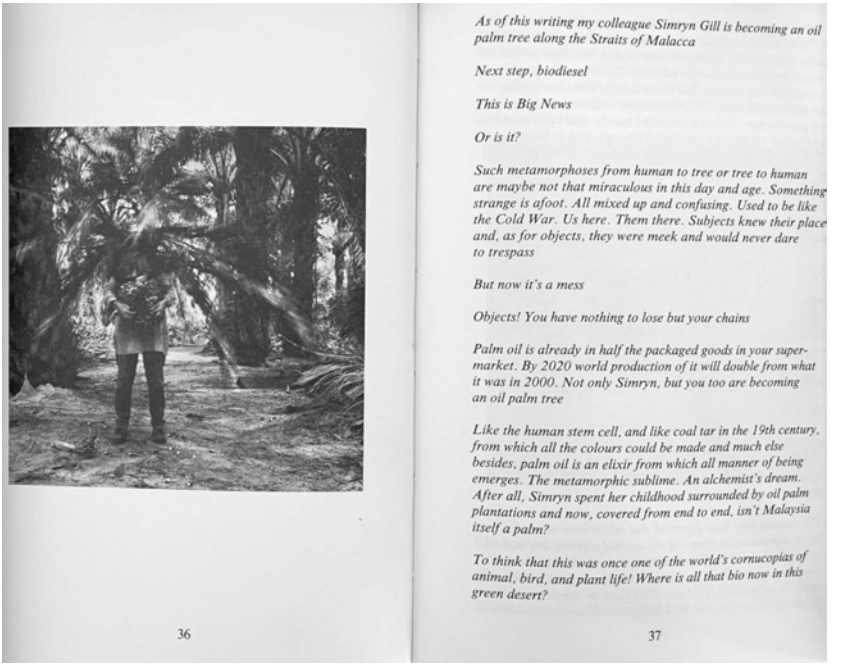
17 See Abraham (2021): "The new department [of European Languages and Transcultural Studies at UCLA] brings together the existing departments of Germanic languages, French and Francophone studies, Italian and Scandinavian. … The term 'transcultural' emphasizes shared European roots and an expanded focus on the perspectives of filmmakers, writers and theorists from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Central and South America, and elsewhere."

18 "That is how the thing is written. To write means to graft. … The graft is not something that happens to the properness of the thing. There is no more any thing than there is any original text. Hence, all those textual samples provided by *Numbers* do not, as you might have been tempted to believe, serve as 'quotations,' 'collages,' or even 'illustrations.' They are not being

belief that content can be presented in new formats and packaging, in a new light, without being transformed and transforming, since

> each grafted text continues to radiate back toward the site of its removal, transforming that, too, as it affects the new territory. Each is defined (thought) by the operation and is at the same time defin*ing* (think*ing*). … Inserted into several spots, modified each time by its exportation, the scion eventually comes to be grafted onto itself. The tree is ultimately rootless. (Derrida [1972] 1981, 355–56)

Figure 10: Grafting



Source: Simryn Gill and Michael Taussig. *Becoming Palm* (2017), 36–37. Image: Simryn Gill, from *Vegetation* (2016).

The pathway of palms had taught us that objects could be actionable. This was a key argument in the texts we had read beforehand. The line between the palm as a background, scenic, and/or picturesque representational image and the palm as a living, botanical, exotic, and/or cultivated object had long been blurred:

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applied upon the surface or in the interstices of a text that would already exist without them" (Derrida [1972] 1981, 355; see also Sollers 1968).

> Photographs presented in the [colonial] lectures, books, and postcards formed a visual grammar that over time, through successive reproduction and repetition, defined what was characteristic or representative of the island. … In the case of Jamaica at the turn of the twentieth century, although imagers of the New Jamaica concerned themselves with crafting a modern Jamaica, they did so through a purposeful use of images from the past; namely, eighteenth-century plantation paintings and nineteenth-century naturalist representations. (Thompson 2006, 34)

The palms I first confronted in this new Gather.town environment were, in fact, scenery (they, as objects, were not actionable). But embracing the possibility that they might offer themselves up for acts beyond that of looking and recognizing that I am the active agent within this process is the only way to find the actionable object within them: the note. So, while the palm as scenery is not in and of itself actionable, approaching the palm as pure scenery will prevent one from progressing. Palms were already singled out in the texts we read as objects that were historically *made to be scenery* rather than objects that were essentially and only that, so it makes sense that, if one wants to think about how to put into practice the lessons from the texts, one must first think about how to position and reconfigure these objects anew.[19] The challenge was to not only show the history of palm tree dreams, of palm fantasies and sites of projection, but also to appropriate and put into a new practice the speculation that these dreams once embodied, while considering the different instruments at my disposal to do so and their visual politics of pedagogy, the epistemic values inscribed into these new foreign environments of remote learning.

It was an experience of estrangement that felt familiar—a dizzying groundlessness that takes over in a completely new territory, almost like living abroad for the first time. Since study abroad programs were put on hold during the Covid pandemic, there's been talk about to how to make them more accessible (see Durden 2020). Mobility as a precondition for in real-life study abroad has meant that only "2 percent of all undergraduates and 16 percent of those who earn a bachelor's degree" in the U.S. take part, leading some institutions to experiment with virtual exchange as a way to address this equity barrier (Fischer 2021). But it's not really the *what* of study abroad that is key, the Google Earth VR technology that shows students the iconic monuments and museums they know from postcards (see Redden 2020). It's also the *how* of study abroad—how experiences of estrangement in a radically different environment can make students question what they thought they already knew. "'What matters isn't place but what happens in that place'" (Larry A. Braskamp

19 On "the conversion or re-purpose … of things ('Zweckentfremdung der Dinge') contrary to their original design intention," see Bieling et al. in this volume as well as Schüttpelz (2006) and Brandes and Erlhoff (2006).

in Fischer 2015). It's normal for a temporal lag to accompany some of the most vivid and meaningful experiences from studying abroad. Something in this new environment felt disorienting and uncomfortable in the moment, and after returning home, students kept reflecting on it, mulling it over, learning from it, and incorporating it into their everyday perspectives and worldviews (see Fischer 2013). "The most common type of memories [from study abroad] were ones that caused anxiety related to confronting difficult, stressful situations of being in a different culture. Alumni reported these types of experiences were still significant in providing meaning to their lives, even decades later. Can virtual education abroad reproduce these long-lasting effects?" (Whalen 2020). Or, for those of us (still) teaching remotely: Can the strange video conferencing landscapes and landmines we have found ourselves navigating make us more flexible when it comes to finding ways of fostering these long-lasting effects in our own classroom cultures, particularly given that these environments were usually as new for instructors as they were for students?

David Davies writes about this in his account of how he accidentally buried his virtual anthropology class. In their first *Minecraft* session in January 2021, Davies noted that "students gave examples of how they *couldn't make sense* of what was going on. They had problems with learning the controls. They couldn't orient themselves. … They didn't know *how to comport themselves* in the new context" (2021). It gets interesting when Davies's next experiment with the platform fails, and the instructor is then no longer the tour guide. A key portal in their virtual classroom is obstructed, leaving the class, including the instructor, dispersed, trapped, and confused in the dangerous underworld dimension of the game, the Nether.

> If I, in any way, considered the Minecraft experiment comparable to study abroad, I was failing on our first day and I was getting panicked. I'm used to having control over class time and the general order of things in the classroom. Yet, at that moment, I had no control. My class was spread across two dimensions in a virtual world during a pandemic. And, we still had to get to the day's assigned text! What about course content?! (Davies 2021)

What about course content? We're used to thinking of media technology in the classroom as a delivery method for course content. When it doesn't function in this way, when students disobey the media devices policy in the syllabus by filling their laptops and smartphones with content unrelated to the course, we think of it as an adversarial screen. The second screen debate brings many ideological beliefs about the relationship between pedagogical practices and media technology to the surface, from "highbrow" versus "lowbrow" content and "active" versus "passive" engagement in "public" versus "private" spheres, to information "directly" related to course content versus information that "distracts." Already in 1971, when the Open University in the UK first experimented with broadcasting course content to its students via radio

and television, lowbrow associations with these medial forms presented a problem as well as a potential for knowledge disseminated and authorized by a university.

> If universities and museums have traditionally been given the job of establishing and maintaining what Raymond Williams called "the selective tradition" of so-called high culture … then television became one of the most powerful technologies for questioning the unassailable consecration of the masterpiece and the genius. A television-based university was therefore caught in an ambivalent position between forces that sought to maintain a hierarchy of cultural production and those for whom culture was everywhere and ordinary. (Highmore 2018, 182; Williams 1977, 115)[20]

Conventional approaches to "lowbrow" medial forms that outright disregard or diminish their epistemic values and potential for knowledge production and dissemination at the university level are often informed by hierarchical beliefs about learning modalities, such as "the prospect of the mass of passive listeners who were gullible, suggestible, malleable, impressionable, compliant. … assum[ing] that the default position of the listener was one of passivity out of which they had to be jolted" (Lacey 2013, 114). In the formative era of broadcasting, "distracted listening" was something that men, based on the gendered correlation of the private sphere with feminine domesticity, had to try to actively resist.[21] The history of the concept of distraction itself across various media reveals similar fluctuations about "good" versus "bad" forms of distraction according to class-based and gendered ideologies.[22]

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20 "The OU [Open University] was born from an insistence that technology mattered, that technology shaped our perception of the world. As an institution, it shared [John] Berger's sense of seriousness as well as his desire to question the assumptions that presumed the natural superiority of one mode of cultural production over another" (Highmore 2018, 183; Berger 1972). This bias against broadcast media perpetuated despite the many instances at the OU when, for example, "a teaching exercise [in television] turned into research" (Benton 2018, 95). "You might think that, between writing texts and doing television, radio, or radiovision programmes, the media would be more lightweight, but in fact, in my experience, it was always the other way around. A lot of research that I later developed and that others who were involved in the course [A305: History of Architecture and Design 1890–1939] later developed, came out of television and radio, because every programme was primary research" (Benton 2018, 96). See also Moreno (2020).

21 "The assumption here [even by those who were championing radiogenic artforms, such as Rudolf Arnheim] that the listener is male is not just a product of the linguistic bias of the age. It also has to do with the pervasive but unspoken alignment of distracted listening with the domestic and therefore feminine sphere. The male listener has to *struggle* against the feminine surroundings to achieve mastery over the acoustic environment" (Lacey 2013, 129).

22 "The actual hype of a deep-attention reading is, seen from a media archaeological perspective, not simply nostalgic. It forgets its 'dark side,' as it was seen in the civil cultures of the 18th

While, before Covid, we could still try to fool ourselves into believing that our policies on (against) media devices in the classroom worked for us and were necessary on our syllabi to prevent temptations, distraction, and mischief, we now have to return to and complicate the original *Minecraft* question: What about course content when the second screen is not only inevitable but also, as in the case of video conferencing, an essential part of the means of delivery and interaction?[23] How can our mandatory, synchronized foray into virtual environments that experiment with the second screen present an opportunity for us to better understand, experience firsthand, and test out the complex relationships between technology and pedagogy in these historical media developments and practices, such as the history of remote university education via television and radio and the gendered lineage of "active" viewing and "distracted" listening? Such experiments would first have to acknowledge that the second screen we pay so much attention to in times of remote instruction was always already more than a means of delivery, and this goes for instructors and students alike. After all, for whom is the experiment in the experimental humanities intended?[24] And how might we use these new video conferencing platforms to set up experimental classroom systems that are deliberately not clearly defined from the outset, so we can generate new questions altogether (Rheinberger [2001] 2006, 33)? If research begins with the choice of a system, it might be worth considering how to make getting lost an essential part of the process of returning to campus too.

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and 19th century, when bored middle-class women were accused of being addicted to reading novels and were condemned for escaping into exciting dream worlds. Deep concentration was regarded as dangerous then, because it leads to absentmindedness and even mental confusion, making individuals unusable, particularly for a capitalist economy. … I was surprised to read in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* that, according to [Theodor W.] Adorno and [Max] Horkheimer, a total excess of distraction comes close to art in its extremity. … In this passage of their book, Adorno and Horkheimer are saying … that an accumulation and intensification of distraction is able to fulfill the task of negation that was originally dedicated to art, because it alters the state of the subject in the world completely. With this thought in mind it would be really funny and, at the end much less elitist, to speculate on what Adorno would say about the Internet" (Löffler 2013, 552, 554–55). See Löffler (2014, 315–16) and Horkheimer and Adorno ([1947] 1996, 143–50).

23 See Kanth (2020).

24 "Most of us [in the humanities] still tend to be nonexperimentalists. We stick with what already exists, seeing our objects of study as finished products, faits accomplis … works of literature created three hundred years, thirty years, or three years before we turn our attention to them. Completed before our arrival and summoned now only to be observed and critiqued, these antecedent objects stand at an input-discouraging distance. … We don't dream of collaborating with these texts, nor do we design experiments to test their behavior under altered circumstances" (Dimock 2017, 243).

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