



Mourning our Collective Space: Reimagining our Community on the Screen

By Anjuli Joshi Brekke

Recently, I was Zooming with a good friend of mine who has been struggling with [quarantine fatigue](#). As an extrovert who is energized by engaging with other people, she is struggling with feelings of isolation and loss of purpose. When I pointed out to her that she talks to friends and coworkers online every day, she sighed. Although virtual connection helps, she stressed “It’s not the same vibe.” Seeing your classmates, friends, and co-workers’ faces neatly displayed in little rows on your computer screen certainly [creates a different vibe](#). As [Interrupting Privilege](#) has moved online, we’ve had to cultivate a new vibe, to mourn and reimagine our collective space.

In their [blog posts](#), many of the Interrupting Privilege students and community members discuss the importance of embodying the same physical space, of having a place where “folks can be unapologetically black,” as one student puts it. Another student writes about the transformative potential of assembling together at the [Northwest African American Museum \(NAAM\)](#): “it provided a space for radiant, spirited Black bodies to come together and just be.” Another student discusses how although museums are spaces he usually associates with a legacy of “violence and imperialism,”

NAAM is different. It offers instead a glimmer of hope “that the stories behind the artifacts can connect us to our sense of self.” These posts highlight the importance of physically assembling with other Black people in a space built by the local Black community to honor Black History. When we were all ordered to stay isolated in our homes to prevent the spread of COVID-19, however, we were forced to radically rethink how we would continue to maintain this vital community going forward.

The virus has not only impacted our ability to assemble as a large group at the museum; it has also impacted how we are recording conversations between participants. In the fall of 2019, we recorded dialogues between Black high school, undergraduate, and graduate students from all over Seattle. The intimate and lively exchanges that took place in our recording studio on campus covered a wide variety of themes and experiences, ranging from heated debates over the [N-word and the power of language](#) to comparing strategies for dealing with [microaggressions](#). We used audio clips from these dialogues to fuel discussions during the subsequent gatherings at NAAM.

In early December, in the times before we feared to breathe the same air, I remember sitting in our small recording studio with fellow researcher Darius Presley and two passionate high school students who are long-time friends. The recording space seemed to vibrate with energy as they began their animated back-and-forth comparing their experiences as young, Black women in Seattle. Although these conversations

typically last 40-50 minutes, that day in the studio over an hour and a half flew by. That was the last conversation I helped record. Now that we've entered the age of social distancing, it's hard to imagine squeezing four people into that small, soundproof studio with its air-tight seal ever again.

A few months after we recorded that last dialogue, we played [an audio clip](#) from the conversation at the NAAM. The room buzzed with vitality as fellow Black students and community members first listened to the wisdom of these young women's words, and then lovingly engaged, challenged and affirmed their perspectives. One student's blog post paints this pre-corona scene beautifully: "Since starting the Interrupting Privilege project, I've never felt more at home with a group of strangers in this city. Knowing this is something of a rarity, a room full of melanated people, all wanting to learn from one another." That was the last time we shared the communal space of the NAAM before our world shut down. Although we can no longer assemble, the pandemic has forced us to find innovative ways of continuing our work through the chaos.

I'm now helping to record conversations on Zoom between our community member partners. As we've moved these intimate recordings online, in addition to the lack of body language, smell and touch that shape the contours of physical conversations, we've also had to deal with occasional glitches and loss of connection. "Are you still there? Or are you frozen?" When we are all sitting in the same room, leaning toward each other, we listen not only to what the speaker is saying but also the position and

movement of their body in relation to ours. The vibrant and chaotic energy of being in the physical community with others simply does not translate to The Brady Bunch boxes on the screen.



https://www.reddit.com/r/Zoom/comments/g1d8om/zoom_meetings_be_like/

But these are not ordinary times. Although our experiences of isolation, fear, and grief are all different, they remind us of our continued need for community. Despite navigating this new technological terrain, despite moving from a soundproof studio to a

[clothes-filled closet](#), I am grateful for the opportunity to continue to listen to these stories and be a part of this community. As I look at the array of faces alternatively yawning and laughing from the intimacy of their bedrooms, living rooms, and makeshift workspaces across the city, I am comforted that my face is one of many facing the uncertainty of what lies ahead, separately but together.

