



Volume 4, Issue 2

Zoom time

Katherine Quinn

Keywords: multimodal ethnography, zoom

Recommended citation: Quinn, K. (2021). 'Zoom time', *entanglements*, 4(2):19-20



Licensing

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Zoom time

Katherine Quinn

Abstract

This short piece of writing came about over the course of the pandemic via an online writing/reading group set up by four friends, which we called *The Hundreds*. We were inspired by Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart's project of the same name and followed their method, which relies on constraining writing by using word counts of multiples of one hundred. After writing them alone, in advance, we then shared these efforts aloud, communally and supportively every fortnight (the group is ongoing, though meetings are a little less frequent now). My piece, below, came from four separate instalments of our group meeting. I repeatedly returned to the evolving, drop-by-drop effects that Zoom had been having on me, particularly as it destabilised my hard-won comfort in being a shy person. The word count both constrains and frees. The first stanza was written early on in the first lockdown; the second came shortly after starting a job, entirely virtually, six months later; the third came following a peculiar virtual writing retreat, about a year into the pandemic as routines and manners settled; and the final one is a recent reflection on how we interact with Zoom's own multimodality to navigate awkwardness. The accompanying video is an experiment in re/presenting this multimodality, and the clunky, cathartic, cringe of reading aloud.

[Please see HTML version for accompanying video content](#)

I. Unstable connections

What was it that Jo Freeman said? I know it gave me that sagging sense of relief, that recline—an anxious recline, but still a floating relaxation...an “ah, yes”... feeling that comes when you're handed something your body already knew but hadn't yet reached words for. Structurelessness: 'as useful' as it is 'deceptive'. In calling it *out* as rife with elites, informal dominations, and, ultimately, inactivity, she also called *towards* this silent settling, this loving 'non-gregariousness', strength in structures. It's not about sympathy. With this newly integrated explanation—vindication?—we flipped tied tongues, from selves to wider circles.

But now. Years passed and Zoom tyranny brings the weight back. The sagging “ah...yes” recline reappears but grimly, with time lags and unstable connections. The sinking into tongue-tied anger eases from interpersonal meetings—sometimes, often enough—but rages anew with COVID. Jolting, inner voice: “I haven't yet said a word”, “unmute!”. Outer voice: “sorry, you were saying”, “did that make sense? sorry”, “sorry— no, don't worry—nothing much to add”. The worst is that tacit agreement—at least it feels agreed and made with others; maybe it *would* be better for someone else to talk.

II. Breakout

Is “break out room” true? Day two is conversations with faces unknown; we're catching up, breaking out, pitching-to-peers. Connections flung by Admin from Gallery View to “breakout3” then back, then on out to “breakout2”. Someone says something about Biden; I tumbleweed about trees. Admin is closing the room in five, four, three, two, one. Broken out: boxed in.

I think about Escape Rooms, last year's fad. Another room with a misappropriated label of liberation. Paying for the sensation of threat, of urgency, maybe agency. An escape from where you put yourself; a breakout when you're still not out of anywhere.

III. Disguise the background

Palm trees, moon landings, Bernie's mittens. Homes filtered, masked, on wobbly links to Stoke-on-Trent. Looking in, another camouflage of bodily cues; hands schlurp in and out of view like comedy gunge, unsatisfying pixels roam shoulders, faces, meanings. I wonder about intent and ethics. Hard righteous: Yes it **is** your *~home~*, why **should** you show it to— ... strangers!— one year into *~all this~*? Or soft confessional: there's washing drying behind on radiators, detritus, dust, some shame. Maybe it's just a belch of light-heartedness. Concealing as an attempt at control. Zoom fatigue: we say it but don't reveal our definitions.

IV. Are they just landlords?

Is it just that no one has said anything stranger? I shrug something mindless about renting and eyes beyond me gloss then glitch. Right hands in left-hand corners move mouses, scrolling away from speech to invisible (imagined?) pages, misting up like paranoid Connect-Four walls. Our screens become two-way mirrors. With all faces facing forward, silences that might otherwise have been comfortable - shared - creak: body language moves in foreign tongues. Thankfully, soon, someone 'puts-a-link-in-the-chat'—an unacknowledged Zoom move signalling reset. A grateful rush to click follows; we all frown in interest, breathe, flick emails, then return to talk, eyes, sounds. Renewed, perhaps.

Things I thought with

Berlant, L & Stewart, K., 2019. *The Hundreds*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Escape Rooms: Popular themed activities where groups of participants pay to be locked in a room and must solve puzzles in order to "break out" of it.

Freeman, J., 1971, *The tyranny of structurelessness*. [pdf] Available from Duke University Library Digital Repository: <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/wlmpc/wlmms01018>

Goffman, E., 1990 [1959]., *The Presentation of the self in everyday life*. London: Penguin.

Scott, S. et al. (2012) 'The reluctant researcher: shyness in the field', *Qualitative Research*, 12(6), pp. 715–734. doi: 10.1177/1468794112439015.

Katherine Quinn is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research & Data (WISERD) at Cardiff University where she researches academic and public library spaces through creative ethnographic methods. She completed her PhD in Sociology at the University of Warwick. The thesis was an ethnography of a library in Worcester, UK, and looked at how classificatory practices in library spaces shape encounters with, and ideas of, 'academia' and interact with expressions of worth, dis/comfort and belonging. Alongside the library focus, Katherine is interested in exploring 'shy research' and experimenting with drawing and writing to evoke the felt experience of doing research. **Webpage:** <https://wiserd.ac.uk/about-us/people/katherine-quinn>