

SOCIETY FOR
CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY

Announcements **Events**

Reflections on #displace18

By [Anand Pandian](#)

November 9, 2018

In the spring of 2018, the Society for Cultural Anthropology (SCA) organized an international conference in the form of a virtual and distributed event, to our knowledge the first of its kind in anthropology. Displacements was the 2018 iteration of the SCA biennial meeting, cosponsored by the Society for Visual Anthropology. SCA biennials had hitherto taken place in cities around the United States, most recently Ithaca, Detroit, Providence, and Santa Fe. This year, the conference instead took place as a hybrid virtual and in-person gathering. Taking place in this manner, the meeting was meant to focus anthropological attention on contemporary forms of displacement, but also to displace the conventional conference format. The meeting was anchored by a dedicated website (<https://displacements.jhu.edu>) that hosted and streamed over one hundred prerecorded multimedia presentations. Participants were invited to watch these on their own or to gather with others to take in the conference experience collectively at one of dozens of nodes around the world. The conference thus unfolded as a distributed happening; people were invited to participate wherever they were.

Planning and organizing an event of this kind, we had many rationales in mind. Conference travel carries one of the most significant [carbon footprints](#) for scholars and academics, sometimes involving millions of miles of carbon-fueled travel for everyone to reach one place. We were also thinking about [equitable access](#)—the fact that many people can't afford such travel, including students and scholars working in precarious circumstances, and that many others can't do it at a time of travel bans and visa restrictions, especially here in the United States. Finally, we had been thinking about the odd experience that one

often has as an anthropologist, trying to give some immersive and evocative sense of a distant place while standing in the midst of an ornate hotel ballroom or bland corporate conference center. If we gave presenters the chance to craft their presentations as audiovisual artifacts, could this mode of presentation actually be more immersive and engaging than a conference talk rather than less so?

The conference was an experiment, one that was charged with a tremendous degree of uncertainty. It was exciting to visualize and plan, but frankly also rather nerve-wracking. Ultimately, *Displacements* proved an unexpected success. In the past, SCA biennials have typically drawn around 200 participants, most of whom come from somewhere in the United States. In 2018, with *Displacements*, over 1,300 people participated from over 40 countries, more than half from outside the United States. The conference provided a way to pursue an internationalization of access to anthropological knowledge on a shoestring budget, in a format that was also much more financially accessible to those without formal and secure employment in the field. And all this through what one attendee described enthusiastically as “one of the best binge-watching experiences”: not a bad verdict in this era of streaming video!



Global viewership distribution of Vimeo-hosted *Displacements* video presentations.

In the years ahead, we hope to see more experiments of this kind, especially as the discipline wrestles with the difficult work conditions under which ever more anthropologists pursue the vocation. Such experiments can serve as crucial ways of responding to [the geopolitical, professional, and institutional hierarchies](#) that still organize the production and dissemination of knowledge in the field. With an eye to such future possibilities, we present here a few lessons from our own pursuit of this endeavor, with the hope that they might be useful to others thinking of going down this road. What follows is derived from the experiences of the conference planning team; analytics from the various technical interfaces we used; survey data gleaned from conference presenters, attendees, and node organizers; and social media reportage on the event. Those of us most closely involved in this effort believe that it poses a viable alternative to the in-person megaconference model, and we hope that these findings will substantiate why.

Designing the Conference

When the SCA board began to talk in the fall of 2016 about the possibility of a virtual biennial, we truly had no idea what we were in for. There were some models on our minds, most notably the [nearly carbon-neutral conference](#) organized that year by the Environmental Humanities Initiative at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Ken Hiltner and other organizers of that effort had written [an extensive white paper](#) about the choices they had made and their rationales, a document that became a touchstone for our planning. At the same time, we knew there were certain things we wanted to try to do differently. The Santa Barbara conference made prerecorded presentations available via YouTube over a span of two weeks. This gave participants the chance to watch them at their leisure, but it also dispersed the sense of liveness and simultaneity that a live conference made possible: the feeling of taking part in some event that was unfolding at that very moment. Benedict Anderson's arguments around the imagined communities made by newspapers and other media came to mind; could a platform be devised that would give participants a sense that they were sharing a common experience in time, even at a distance from each other?

Another set of challenges had to do with the unique nature of the digital medium in which

we intended to work. Where, for example, would the conference be hosted? Where, so to speak, would it happen? A [conference website](#) had to be built to host the event, and early on we decided to partner with an institution of higher education rather than a commercial enterprise; Mark Cyzyk of the Johns Hopkins University Libraries joined our team and helped to facilitate the creation of a web platform hosted by the university. For the design of the site and with the SCA's open-access commitments in mind, we at first thought to rely on the Open Conference Systems platform developed by the Public Knowledge Project, a platform with which Mark and our operations advisor Marcel LaFlamme were already familiar. But the highly structured workflow imagined by this platform led us ultimately to WordPress and to our conference manager Laura Johnson, a WordPress developer whom we recruited to build and manage the digital environment that would serve as the conference location. A final question concerned where the presentations themselves would be housed. Concerns about loading time and a fear of crashing servers led us to look beyond Johns Hopkins to commercial providers: YouTube, Vimeo, and Ustream. After much deliberation, we decided on Vimeo, for a few reasons: the quality of streaming videos, their built-in limits on advertising, ease of embedding captions in hosted videos, and safeguards on unauthorized circulation.

These features were crucial considerations. Step by step, we learned that the online medium for the biennial would present unique challenges, often having to do with the highly audiovisual nature of the presentations and their public availability on an Internet platform. Here, form and content would be uniquely inextricable, the arguments made by the conference presentations bound up deeply with their expressive form. From the very outset, we tried to find ways to build awareness of this reality into the design and implementation of the conference. As we asked in the [call for proposals](#) that went out in June 2017: "What kind of understanding can anthropology contribute to the displacements of this time—given, especially, that our most essential techniques like ethnography are themselves predicated on the heuristic value of displacement, on what can be gleaned from the experience of unfamiliar circumstances?" In an effort to elicit presentations that took up this question at the level of form as well as content, we put the call forward in both textual and audiovisual formats.

The idea was to encourage participants to think ahead, to conceive possible presentations

as audiovisual artifacts, and to enfold such possibilities into their ongoing fieldwork: what they were gathering and archiving by way of research material. We reached out to the Society for Visual Anthropology (SVA) and were thrilled to find them willing to join us as cosponsors, bringing in the experience and expertise of their own members. The SVA ultimately curated a [film festival](#) that featured seventeen contemporary ethnographic films as an essential aspect of the conference experience. For presenters who didn't have much experience working with visual material, though, we asked Contributing Editors from the Visual and New Media Review section of the *Cultural Anthropology* website to develop a [participant toolkit](#), a series of practical posts on how to record yourself giving a talk, how to produce a voice-over slideshow, how to make video presentations, and so on. In these preparations, we also emphasized the visibility and durability that an online presentation might have, and we worked to put safeguards in place that would minimize the chance of a presentation being circulated or downloaded beyond the conference environment.

This last concern brings into focus one paradox around access that we had to confront, as planners of a virtual event. On the one hand, we intended to make the conference accessible to those who could not otherwise afford to attend; on the other hand, we still needed frameworks to regulate and indeed limit access to conference materials, given the sensitive nature of geopolitical displacement and the risk of exposing the subjects of the presentations to unwanted forms of visibility. We ultimately decided to restrict conference access to registered participants, but to set the registration fee at a nominal threshold of US\$10 to ensure its affordability. This was something that many participants and observers noted online, the rare possibility of attending a conference for just \$10. At the same time, we had to confront the fact that the question of cost does not exhaust the problem of access. The Disability Research Interest Group of the Society for Medical Anthropology contacted the conference planning team soon after the call for proposals went public, rightly pointing out that our materials had paid insufficient heed to concerns around providing access to participants with disabilities. We were lucky to have Tyler Zoanni join our planning team as access advisor and to contribute a post to the participant toolkit on ["Creating an Accessible Online Presentation."](#) In it, Tyler wrote about access as an "art of conviviality," one that "requires conscious reflection, creativity, and openness to difference," a philosophy we sought to fold into the evolving design of the conference.

From the outset, meanwhile, Displacements was also intended as something more than an online event. The website would have to sustain virtual forms of conversation and exchange, but we hoped as well to find a space for the vibrancy of face-to-face encounter. The conference was therefore planned as a hybrid event, combining a virtual interface with [local nodes](#) wherever individuals and institutions saw fit to propose and organize them. As the call for proposals began to circulate, it was exciting to see many proposals for such nodes come very quickly from anthropology departments in North America and Europe. This, however, did not adequately meet the expectations of international reach that the medium of the conference promised. We therefore reached out to the Wenner-Gren Foundation, which generously sponsored the organization of fifteen local conference nodes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—in the cities of Addis Ababa, Ankara, Bangalore, Blomfontein, Cartagena, Dakar, Delhi, Jakarta, Kolkata, Lahore, Lima, Quetzaltenango, Seoul, Shanghai, Singapore, and Tangier. Over time, we were able to fill out a conference [node map](#) that plotted more than fifty such gathering points in twenty different countries around the world.



These partner events were sometimes organized by local scholars in these cities, and at other times by American graduate students living in these locales. Some planned mainly to screen and discuss conference presentations, while others planned talks and workshops of

their own as supplemental events. Seeing the unique face that the conference was beginning to take on in each of these places was quite thrilling for us as organizers, especially as we began to see posters advertising what Displacements would be in different places around the world.

DISPLACEMENTS

The Kolkata node of the 2018 meeting of the Society for Cultural Anthropology, in collaboration with the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta and the Jadunath Bhavan Museum & Resource Centre



Rohingya refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

April 20-21, 2018

Venue: Jadunath Bhavan Museum & Resource Center
10 Lake Terrace, Kolkata 700029

Faculty Speakers:

Inaugural address: Professor Bhaskar Chakrabarty, University of Calcutta
Plenary address: Professor Samir Kumar Das, University of Calcutta
Keynote address: Professor Manas Ray, CSSSC

+ Panel Presentations

+ Virtual conference viewing session + Community member panel

DETAILS & REGISTRATION ONLINE:
DISPLACEMENTSKOLKATA.WORDPRESS.COM

Free and open to all

The digital medium's potential for physical displacement opened up some fascinating fractal prospects in terms of local conference access. The Southern Anthropological Society, for example, was due to meet in Chattanooga, Tennessee during the same days as our biennial. They organized a media room to screen Displacements on an ongoing basis within their own conference: one meeting, in other words, taking place simultaneously within the physical space of another. Meanwhile, given the diversity of circumstances in which these local events were intended to take place, unique difficulties also ensued, most especially given the presentation of the conference via streaming online media. Dick Powis, a graduate student at Washington University in St. Louis, organized a local node at the West African Research Center in Dakar, Senegal, where he was in the midst of dissertation fieldwork. Internet bandwidth quickly proved a serious concern. We worked closely with Powis in devising an alternative in case of trouble: a 4G modem to stream the conference via a cellular network, rather than the host institution's Internet connection.

As nodes continued to materialize in scattered places, and as we began to see people share news about and register for the event from nearly every continent, a new set of logistical challenges presented themselves around scheduling. Conferences are scheduled with the physical availability of participants in mind: how early one can expect people to show up, when they'll need meals and other breaks, how long one can keep things going before winding up for the evening. With Displacements, all materials would be prerecorded and available to watch at will on the conference website. At the same time, we wanted to sequence and stream the presentations on a "live" schedule, giving people the sense of something happening at that moment, something that they could tune into collectively, responding in real time via social media and other conversational platforms. With

participants attending from so many time zones, though, on whose schedule would this unfold? Eventually, and quite belatedly, we realized that the most responsive and inclusive way of structuring the schedule would be to stream the presentations on a [twenty-four-hour around-the-clock basis](#), scheduling each presentation twice over the three days of the conference so that a participant in any given place had a fair chance of seeing any of the presentations at a reasonable time. This was a completely unanticipated dimension of access and equity, and it put us in the position of having to orchestrate something like a temporary webcast channel with live programming for the duration of the conference.

This conference livestream itself posed serious technical difficulties. We wanted to give participants who logged into the conference the sense of having landed on what was happening at that time, coming immediately upon the livestream before anything else. It took many rounds of exploration and trial-and-error before we hit upon a way of doing this, as mainstream platforms like YouTube and Vimeo were not set up to allow the creation of a continuous and scheduled video stream based on prerecorded material. We ultimately partnered with a Baltimore-based video production company, Open Range Video, whose proprietor Hiro Amano took a personal interest in the conference and the challenge of making this work. With Hiro's tireless and assiduous help, the conference presentations were organized into discrete blocks of programming that were transcoded and rerecorded as streaming video files. Johns Hopkins University made available to us a private and secure Ustream video channel where these blocks of programming could be uploaded and hosted, and it was from this channel that the conference would stream through the Displacements website.

Like those who would attend the conference, our own core team of conference organizers was scattered in multiple places. In the final weeks of planning, we took to organizing regular video meetings through Zoom and began working closely with each other via Slack on different aspects of conference design. Until the very eve of the conference, however, the process was riven with tremendous uncertainty. "We really did build the road as we walked it," [Marcel mused at one point on Twitter](#), a comment that seemed to capture the emergent and improvisational character of this process. At every step, challenges of an entirely unforeseen nature seemed to arise. Take, for example, this middle-of-the-night exchange with IT specialist Mike Sellers, following a crisis provoked by incompatible

website plugins that threatened to crash our systems:

Hi Mike, how much of a night owl are you? We are wrestling with a hanging backup

I'll execute a backup for you at the system level now

You're amazing

Database and filesystem backed up at 2:25AM 😊

Amid such technical complications, the logistical challenge of managing an event designed to unfold in dozens of places at once, and the ongoing flood of messages from presenters and participants who were themselves figuring out how to take part in such an event, we simply had no idea what the morning of April 19 would bring us as the conference opened. Our social media manager Darren Byler had a steady stream of material circulating and recirculating via Facebook and Twitter with the hashtag [#displace18](#). Our user experience designer Em Piro had helped to design an imaginative framework for both digital and physical participation, including a “talkspace” on the website where participants could share reflections and compare notes on the experience while it was unfolding. Laura was working around the clock to address final wrinkles with the web platform, while our associate organizers Burge Abiral and Sumin Myung worked to keep track of the multiplying conference nodes. None of us slept very much at all during those final, frantic days and nights. And none of us could say what the conference itself would feel like.

The Conference Experience

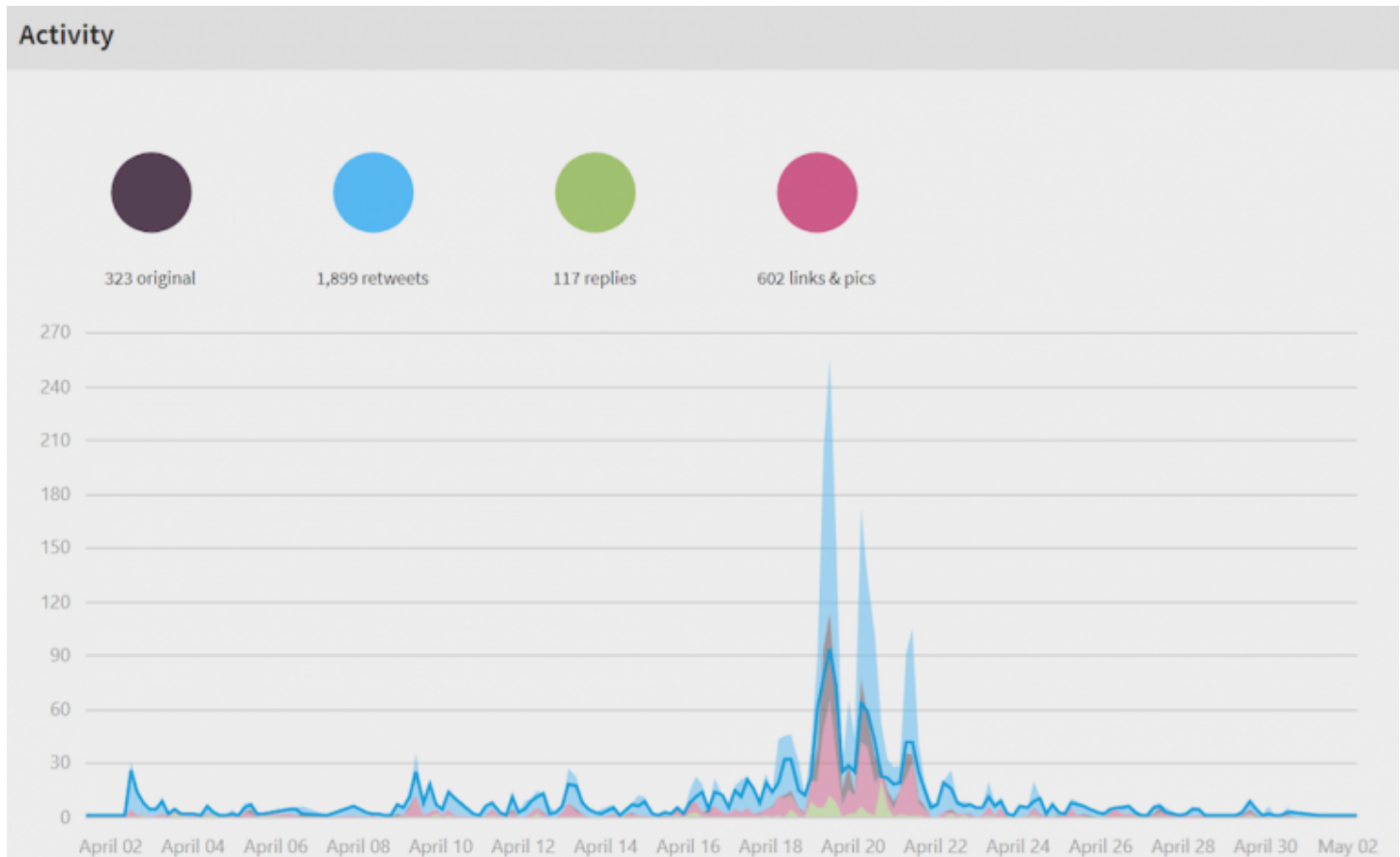
Here's how Mark Cyzyk, scholarly communication architect at Johns Hopkins and our conference's technical advisor, recalls how things unfolded that day:

I distinctly remember sitting at my home workstation the morning of April 19, anxiously awaiting the start of the first video stream. At precisely 8 a.m. EST, Hiro Amano's 10-9-8-7-6 . . . countdown appeared on the screen. The conference had begun! Scholars the world over, in dozens of groups or nodes or alone in their offices, were simultaneously seeing the same presentation. As those three days passed, I monitored our web traffic. As the globe turned, I felt the thrill of announcing on our Slack channel: *Nighttime for Singapore and Sydney, but Dakar just came online!* What Dakar saw today, Singapore and Sydney could see again tomorrow. And when the three days of this conference were up, I felt like we, the world over, had experienced something together.

All of us on the conference planning team felt this heady sense of excitement. Admittedly, there was also a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty in not knowing what exactly was happening—or not happening—and where. How to keep track of an event unfolding in so many places at once? The web interface itself had to be tended and debugged with great urgency as each session came online. Registration, meanwhile, presented some of the most serious difficulties, because the SCA, as a section of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), was required to route all financial transactions through the AAA's payment system. This meant that no one could register directly for the conference via our website, but would have to toggle back and forth between our interface and the AAA's. The result was a great deal of confusion for conference participants, as we were forced to manually approve individual registrants for conference website access. As news of the event continued to spread hour by hour, people continued to register while we did our best to keep up with this flow.

Two social media channels for #displace18 posts were featured on the sidebars of the website: Twitter and Instagram. Metrics for these posts offer one way of gauging

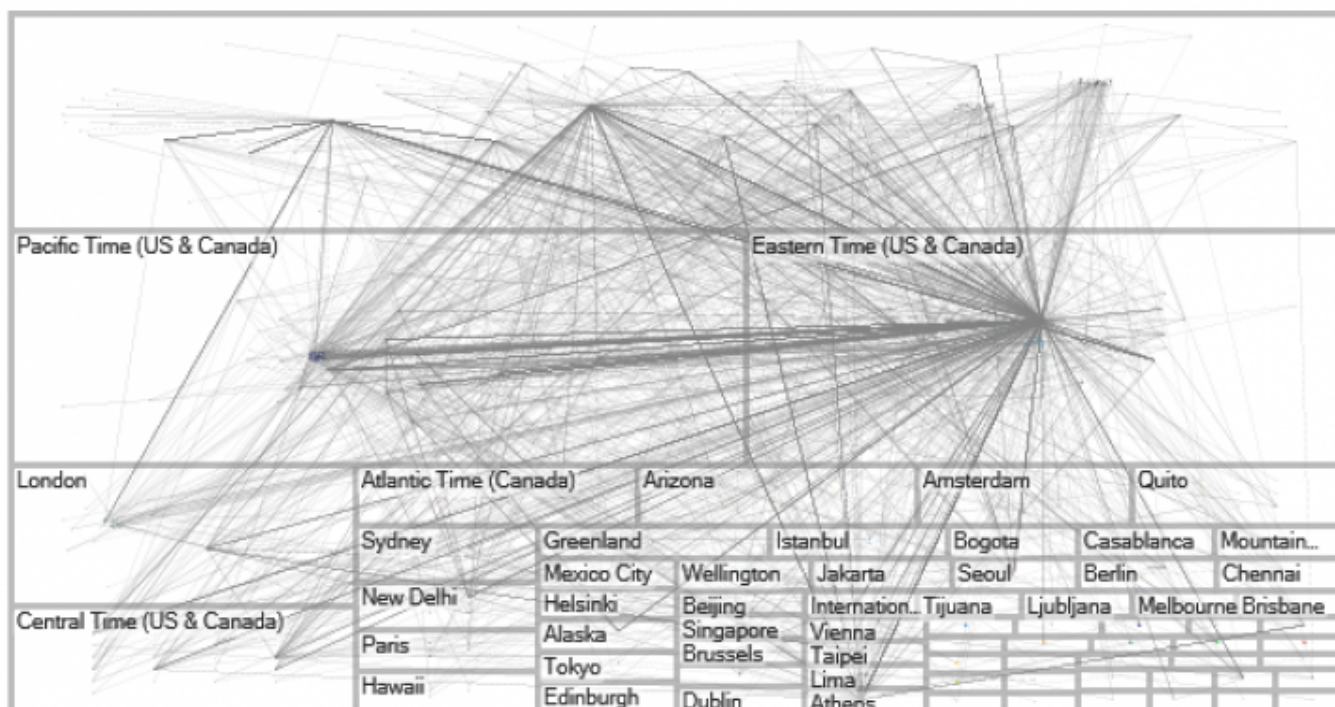
engagement with the conference. Nearly 700 Twitter users used the conference hashtag over the month of April, for a total of more than 2,900 tweets. Examined graphically, this data communicates a buildup of attention culminating in three pulses of activity over the days of the conference.



Visualization produced via Tweet Binder, courtesy of Darren Byler.

Another way to analyze this activity is by geographical locus, which Towson University anthropologist Samuel Collins did by [grouping #displace18 tweets by time zone](#). Collins found “significant traffic between different zones, particularly (but not exclusively) between North America and Europe.” The geographical loci for #displace18 posts identified in his analysis were also striking: tweets and retweets from a number of prominent cities on various continents, but also from more far-flung localities like Midway Island, one of the most remote places on Earth. Data from Ustream revealed that people had registered and tuned into the livestream webcast from 42 different countries. Google Analytics, meanwhile, reported that the conference website had been accessed by more than 3,600 users in 93 countries, more than half (55%) of whom were based outside the United States.

Tweets using the hashtag #displace18, grouped by timezone.



Created with NodeXL Pro (<http://nodexl.codeplex.com>) from the Social Media Research Foundation (<http://www.smrfoundation.org>)

Time zone mapping of #displace18 tweets, courtesy of Samuel Collins.

Much of this international activity was led and inspired by the conference nodes: ten in Europe, ten in Asia, four in Africa, four in Latin America, and the remainder in North America. Quito, which Collins found especially active in his Twitter analysis, was one such node. As these gatherings began to report via social media on their local activities and reactions to the presentations, we began to get a sense of how the conference was going in these distant places. Groups in Seattle, Seoul, and Quetzaltenango shared images of the brightly lit classrooms where they met around desks and screens. In Jakarta, meanwhile, local participants had gathered around the low tables of a coffeehouse terrace to take in the presentations. The Tangier node organized by Columbia University graduate student George Bajalia shared a photo of themselves watching and discussing Jason De León's plenary presentation on migrants and smugglers on the southern border of the United States, comparing that situation to their own in Morocco. Jason himself was participating in the conference from his fieldsite in southern Arizona, and responded to the Moroccan post from there: "So cool! Greetings from Arizona." Such lateral connections between places were some of the most exciting aspects of Displacements.



A George Bajalia

@ageorgeb



Thinking thru Jason de Leon's work on migration and borders as it relates to our context in Tangier. @culanth #displace18 @TangierLegation

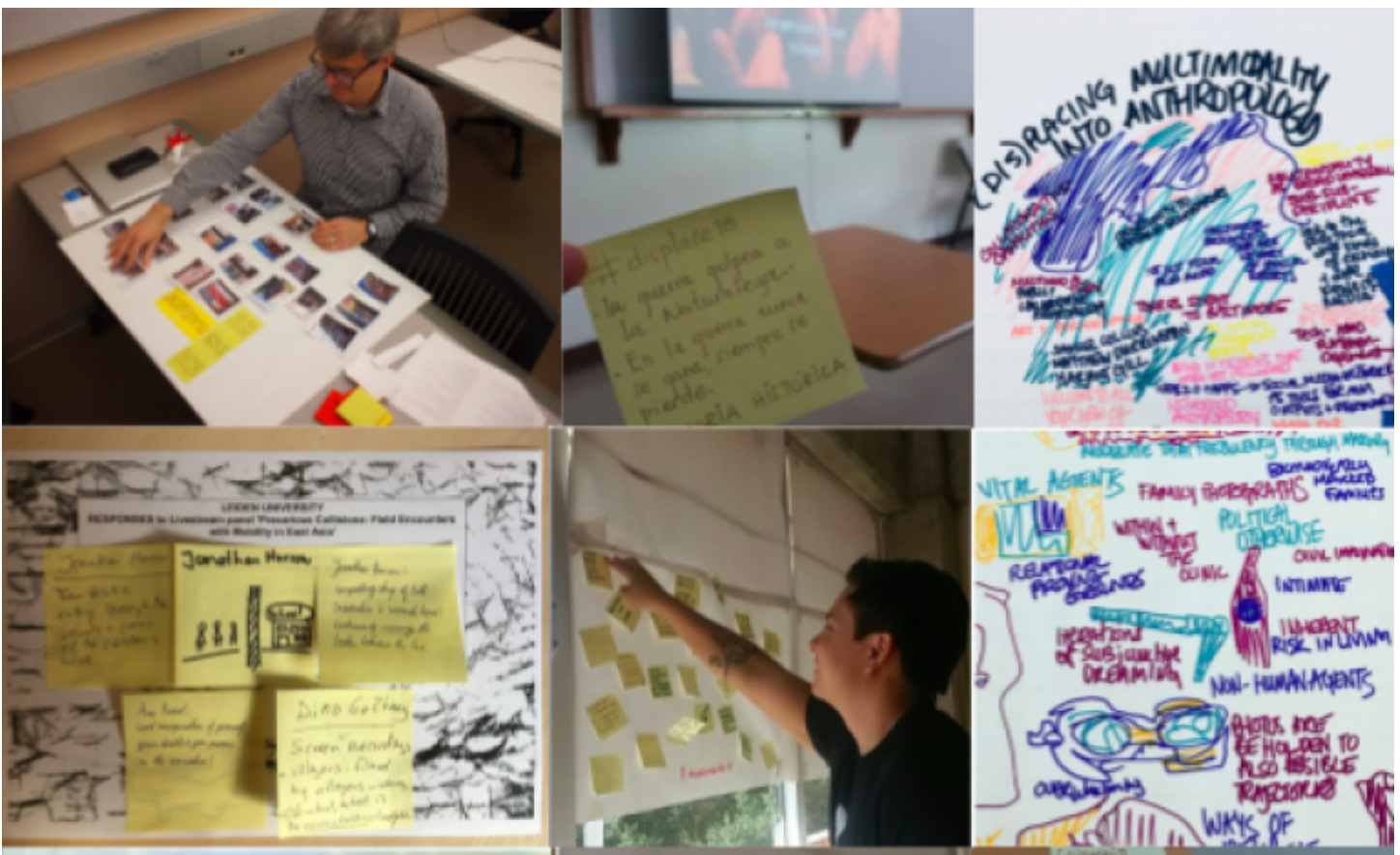


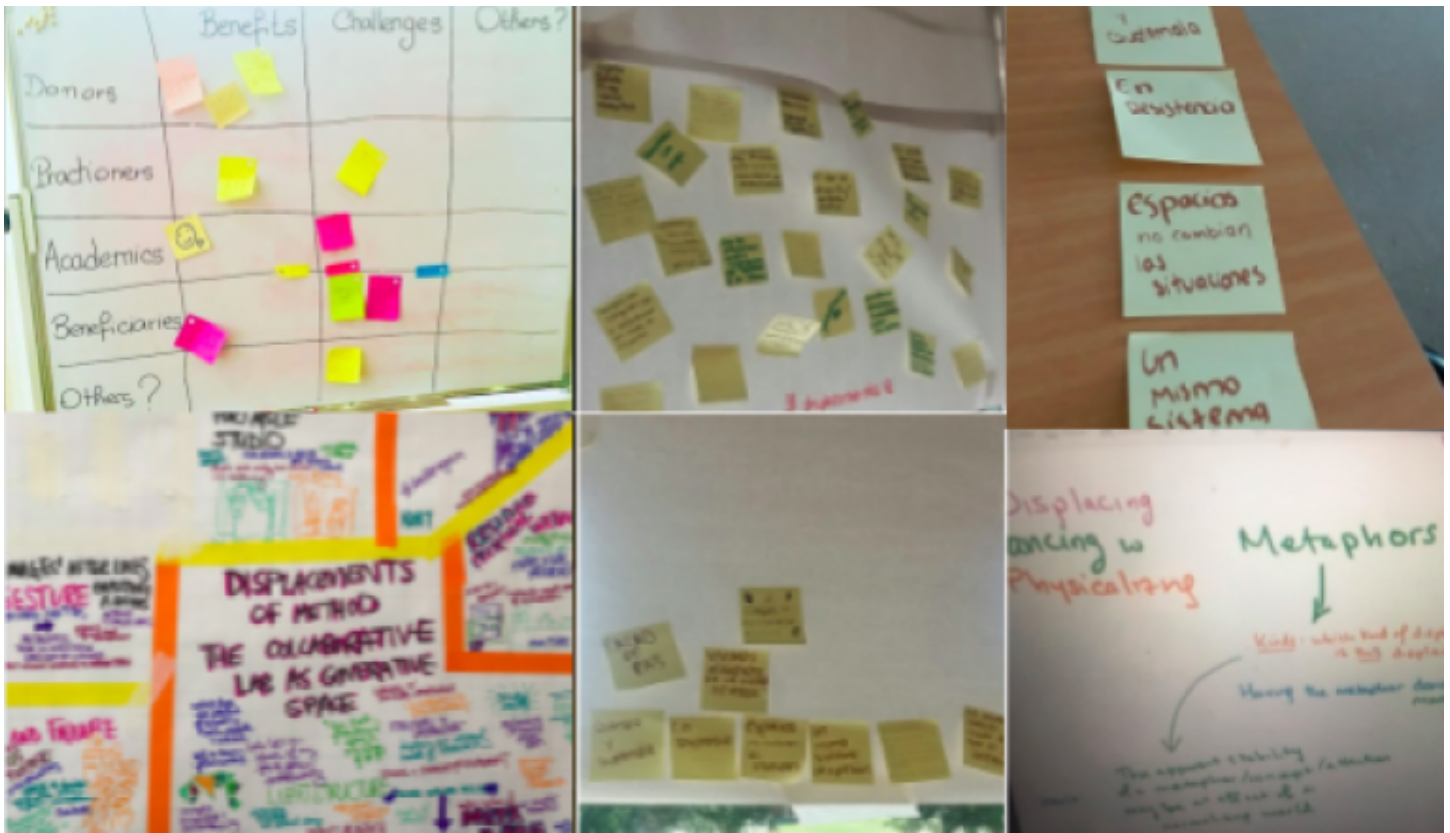
4/21/18, 11:27 AM from Tangier Medina, Morocco

2 Retweets 9 Likes

2 RETWEETS 0 LIKES

Whether taking place in North America, Europe, or the global South, the nodes proved to be spaces for unusual forms of conference participation and interaction. “It’s ethically righteous and strangely intimate,” one node organizer reflected once the conference was over. “Our conversation was much more open and participatory than a Q&A would have been.” The organizer of another local node reported that “a nice unexpected result was the attendance of a host of people (particularly students) who were not affiliated with local universities, but were based in the area and found their way to the node events.” We could see through social media that these local convergences were happening in different places: the many New York City–based anthropologists who came to watch the plenary together at the Wenner-Gren Foundation, or the thirty professors and students from various Toronto universities who gathered for two days of panel screenings and discussions at that node. Em had developed and circulated a series of ways by which node organizers could facilitate collective forms of place-based participation, such as brief critical commentaries, modes of affective response, and creative forms of expression. Many nodes shared post-it notes that they had used to facilitate discussion.





Attendees share place-based experiences with hand-drawn visuals, courtesy of Em Piro.

Thinking back on the conference, Em shared these reflections on the participant experience:

The virtual conference model provides an exciting opportunity for experimentation using digital tools to foster meaningful connection, idea sharing, and an active, living, crowd-sourced archive of the process itself from many perspectives. In 2018 we embraced multimodal tools that included a mix of digital, visual, textual, linguistic, acoustic, and physical materials. We encouraged connectivity through the playfulness and brevity inherent in the media.

What I measure as a great success of the design elements we chose was this: we were able to make the activity and liveness of the event feel very tangible. Images and comments came in from around the world via the hashtag and through our talkspace portal. The drawspace was exciting when it was used. As folks become accustomed to tools like these, I expect their use to increase. Having facilitation—a presenter responding in real-time, conference organizers eliciting reactions on

social media, coordinating group activities in the talkspace such as a virtual markup ballet—was very effective, and feedback indicated opportunities for doing more of this.

While there were a variety of formats to engage, participants still echoed that they missed the sense of immersion that comes from a place-based conference (though, as some participants pointed out, the virtual platform also affords meaningful engagements not available in place-based conferences). Is it possible to patch in this missing piece? How can we facilitate the networking dimensions of place-based conferencing? What further opportunities exist for radical accessibility, multimodal forms of transfer, and processing information and ideas?

These concerns were especially significant for the 150 individuals who presented work at the biennial. Some of them addressed their virtual and distributed audiences directly in their prerecorded presentations, such as the fifteen anthropologists who spoke powerfully to their experiences of fieldwork and motherhood in the “Mother as Antihero” panel, one of the most celebrated and impactful sessions of the entire event. Most presenters, meanwhile, lent their voices as voiceovers to successions of image and sound, serving as more tangential and elusive presences in relation to their material. What was it like for them to present work in this manner? “Obviously cheaper, less stressful, less fake, less performative, more flexible,” one conference presenter reported, going on to add, however, that what was missing was “smoking cigarettes anxiously outside the conference venue.”

Many presenters told us that they missed such occasions for social interaction and human connection, for which the social media channels and commenting features we had used seemed to be inadequate substitutes. There were panels that saw lengthy exchanges back and forth between presenters and viewers, while in other cases, a presenter would declare themselves available for questions and then find no response. “I could get answers only for my positive comments,” one presenter reported. “More critical comments and questions were left unanswered. I also wish I had gotten more feedback on my own presentation.” Clearly, with respect to this aspect of conference design, more work needs to be done. Some participants suggested that there was a learning curve evident here for planners and participants alike, and that the viability of this mode of interaction would grow over time.

Avid users of social media had a richer experience of audience response, as did those who had the chance to screen their work at conference nodes in their own localities.

The ethnographic films featured in the [Displacements Film Festival](#) were especially prominent in social media engagements with the conference. Many of the seventeen films in the festival were selected for screening by the hosts of local nodes and as resources for contemporaneous classroom teaching. Conference attendees, especially undergraduate students, were engaged by what SVA curators described as the "visual and sensorial storytelling" undertaken by these works, all of which painted "vivid portraits of lives in transition, and of spaces and places in various states of upheaval." In another instance of the place-based convergences made possible by the hybrid conference format, Sydney-based anthropologist Malini Sur's 2016 film about bicycle culture in Kolkata, *Life Cycle*, was screened in Kolkata itself. Local node organizers Calynn Dowler and Aditi Mukherjee reported that "there was a lot of enthusiasm" for the film, prompting an extended discussion among the forty local attendees.

APRIL 19-21, 2018

f #displace18

Full program at: displacements.jhu.edu/festival

To view films, please register at: displacements.jhu.edu

17 Feature Films

Films that paint vivid portraits of lives, places,
& spaces in states of upheaval and transition.

- A Letter to Mohamed (2014), 35mins
- Awake, A Dream From Standing Rock (2017), 88mins
- Changa Revisited (2016), 60mins
- Chocolate of Peace (2016), 55mins
- Let the Fire Never Die (2016), 30mins

DISPLACEMENTS



**DISPLACEMENT
VIRTUAL FILM
FESTIVAL**



- **Good White People (2016), 16mins**
- **Grabbing Dignity (2017), 32mins**
- **Exit Zero: An Industrial Family Story (2017), 92mins [also featured in main program on Saturday, April 21, 2018]**
- **Illusions In Stone (2016), 58mins**
- **Highway Rest Stop (2016), 55mins**
- **At the Crossroads (2017), 47mins**
- **Life Cycle (2016), 42mins**
- **The Maribor Uprisings (2017), 56mins**
- **Our Future Came from the School: The Story of the Yangjuan Primary School (2016), 35mins**
- **Sent Away Boys (2016), 40mins [also featured in main program on Friday, April 20, 2018]**
- **Somos (We Are) (2016), 43mins**
- **Zawawa: the Sound of Sugar Cane in the Wind (2017), 50mins**

**CURATED BY FIONA P. MCDONALD & HARJANT GILL
ORGANIZED BY THE SOCIETY FOR CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY & THE SOCIETY FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

Displacements Film Festival poster, courtesy of the Society for Visual Anthropology.

In their survey responses, nearly two-thirds of registered participants reported attending the conference from home, rather than from an office or university setting. There were those who relished the chance to do so, proudly sharing on social media images of the couch or armchair in which they had cocooned themselves to take in the event. Others, meanwhile, admitted that such circumstances could make for distracted engagement. “I was multitasking and doing other things,” one presenter wrote. “I wasn’t really paying attention to the conference itself.”

Anyone who attends a traditional conference knows, of course, that distractions are legion even in such environments. In the face of competing demands or a wandering attention span, a virtual platform opens a different prospect, the possibility of repeated viewing: taking in a presentation iteratively, once and again, rather than straining to absorb it all at

once in a single sitting. This was something that appealed to many who took part in Displacements, and with this possibility in mind, we decided to lengthen the window for the conference itself. The website remained live through the end of April 2018, with presentations still available for viewing via panel webpages ten days past the formal end of the conference itself. People continued to register and tune in during that period, even after the conference itself was technically over. Some even screened these presentations while teaching in those subsequent days, turning their own classrooms into impromptu conference nodes.

Ultimately, participants accessed the conference in three distinctive ways: as a livestream of scheduled webcasting between April 19–21; as an archive of prerecorded videos to watch at will on their own; and as audiences in local nodes that screened whatever those organizers wished to show. One of the biggest surprises came when we began to tally up the viewership numbers across these three platforms. Of the 26 regular panels on the schedule, none had an estimated total audience of less than 45; several had audiences of greater than 200, and, as we were startled to discover, our headlining David Schneider Memorial Plenary event (three video presentations followed by a four-way conversation among the presenters and a moderator that was prerecorded via Zoom) was seen by more than 500 people. On average, we estimate that each of the regular panels had an audience of around 125 people: fifty via the livestream on an individual screen, thirty-five via Vimeo viewings, and another forty unregistered attendees who watched that panel at a local node. For a biennial event whose total number of registered participants typically added up to around 200, these were extraordinary numbers. Indeed, imagine this many people crammed into a conference meeting room: what the hybrid medium made possible was profoundly different.

A total of 155 registered presenters and other attendees responded to an extensive survey that Em Piro developed and circulated in the wake of the conference. One question went as follows: “In ten words or less, what are your key impressions of the conference and festival?” Sized by frequency, here's what those who responded to this question had to say:

non-academic decolonising energy relaxing well-organised
 worthwhile user-oriented high-quality thin lines

comparison between the virtual conference and a hypothetical physical conference based in Baltimore, but an estimate shows that there is a vast difference between the two. Using the home-base locations of registered presenters, we determined that the average flight emissions to Baltimore would have been over two tons of CO₂. If all of those presenters had flown to Baltimore they would have emitted about 420 tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. If we include nonpresenting registrants—who, granted, would be less likely to attend a physical conference—prevented emissions rises to about 1,320 tons. We also prevented about 7 tons of emissions from hotel lodging and use of the meeting space.

But how much energy did the computer servers use? The emissions from three days of streaming video pales in comparison to airline travel. Impressively, 2,389 total hours of panel video presentations were streamed by conference participants. Vimeo and Ustream, the streaming services used, don't publish disaggregated emissions data. But based on [estimates](#) from Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, the total emissions from this many hours of streaming video likely amounts to about one ton: two orders of magnitude less polluting. Thus, a conservative estimate of the environmental benefit of this experiment is about 425 tons of emissions saved. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, that's about the same as 100 cars driven for a year. It's like taking 11,500 cars off the road for the duration of the three-day conference. Go anthropologists!

It remains to be seen how scholarly societies will respond to such evidence; will we, for example, begin to see a virtual alternative to physical attendance at a AAA annual meeting, given the thousands of dollars that airfare, a hotel room, and conference registration can consume, not to mention the millions of flight miles and their environmental consequences? At the SCA, for our part, we are hoping to try something like Displacements again. And when we attempt this, or when others pursue such efforts on their own, here are a few things to keep in mind as lessons and future possibilities to explore.

Distributed conferences are a plausible model. Ultimately, Displacements was more than a virtual conference. This was where the idea began, but it was only when the dust settled

that we realized there were as many unregistered participants who had gathered in person at the four dozen conference nodes as there were registered online participants. These physical gatherings doubled our overall conference attendance. What we learned, in other words, is that there is significant scope for a distributed conference model, one that uses a web interface as a network structure linking far-flung local nodes. This structure was graphically illustrated for us through the node map on the website, but looking ahead, more robust ways to incorporate local nodes could certainly be devised. In any such venture, node organizers should be acknowledged as such: as co-organizers of the conference, local planners in a distributed structure whose work on the ground is essential to the overall experience of the event. Strategies can be devised to rely further on these nodes as sources of conference material—conference panels, local workshops, other local events—that is made available to the conference as a whole, rather than serving mainly as distribution channels. Platforms can also be developed to facilitate node-to-node communication, building on the flashes of such lateral interaction that we saw during Displacements via Twitter and other social media.

Liveness can indeed be conjured. We did not anticipate, in our planning, the extent to which participation in the conference would be anchored in the live video stream that we scheduled and broadcast on the conference landing page. Our hope was that participants, on logging in, would find themselves in the midst of something happening at that time, and this was indeed what most participants reported experiencing. On social media platforms, they conveyed the sense that a given talk or panel was “beginning” at a particular time, even if it was in fact the case that it would also be continuously available for on-demand viewing on its own panel page. We could see that this effect of liveness, the sense of a shared experience in time, depended on the relationship between the various platforms that the conference made available: the live video stream, social media channels for response to its changing content, the Disqus commenting tool that allowed for threaded conversations to develop, and the node-based gatherings where people could participate collectively in these avenues.

Thinking ahead, this quality of liveness, which is essential to a robust conference experience, could also be better kindled in certain ways. For example, although we shied away from this for fear of connection problems, presenters could be invited to appear on

live video immediately after their work is screened to respond in a more personal manner to text-based comments and questions. More can be done as well with regard to commenting infrastructure: would a channel-based medium like Slack, for example, facilitate more dynamic and supple interaction between participants? What other platforms might convey the sense of live commenting and interaction? Could discussants be enlisted to facilitate and moderate virtual exchanges?

The medium demands a different kind of exposition. As organizers, we were glad to see that most conference presentations provided much more than a video recording of a presenter speaking to a camera; instead, they presented a rich assemblage of visual and audio material, in which the speaker's voice was only one element. Various aspects of our planning—the conference videos, the participant toolkit, the close collaboration with SVA—led in that direction. Still, as many participants noted in their reactions to the conference, it did seem with many presentations that speakers had essentially recorded themselves reading a paper as a voiceover for a slideshow of images. One survey respondent wrote:

Such a conference is unprecedented in anthropology, and everyone who participated in our node, presenters, students, collaborators, and curious staff, all had takeaways that will fuel immediate and future endeavors. We fully support another such carbon-conscious, virtual conference next year, though we urge participants to ABANDON PAPER-READING SLIDESHOWS! 😊

While this format is entirely appropriate given the academic nature of the enterprise, the question remains: what would it mean to give image and sound more space for expression in the context of such presentations, rather than subordinating these elements to the steady progression of a written text read aloud? There were many contributions that broke quite powerfully and creatively with this mode: for example, one by Cornell graduate student Emiko Stock that deliberately held the screen black for the most part, punctuating it only occasionally by flashes of image, or another by Duke graduate student Joella Bitter, in which the visual material followed cues in a stream of writing that surfaced slowly as a typed series of words on a parallel screen. Such experiments lead us to imagine what a conference might look and feel like with more ventures of this kind. Not everyone has to become an ethnographic filmmaker or an avant-garde video artist. Yet the medium has

possibilities we are still learning how to use.

The potential for distraction has to be negotiated. With an in-person conference, participants are encouraged to set aside for a short time, as best as possible, other demands on their attention: teaching duties, committee meetings, children and other household responsibilities. With Displacements and our invitation to “tune in wherever you are,” we could see that for many attendees this amounted to a new kind of multitasking. People talked about this on social media; some even shared images of themselves watching a presentation while a toddler wandered in and out of view. This was of course part of the point, to make it easier for people to participate given the circumstances of their lives, but it also raises other kinds of challenges with respect to attention and distraction. Our hope was that presentations rich in sensory content and engagement would draw viewers in, foment the sense of a tangible and immersive proximity, even if mediated by a screen. We knew, however, that the immediate worlds beyond those screens would also tug, as playfully evoked by the illustration made for the conference by the artist Michael Bracco, an image shown at each break between panels:



These are tensions that will continue to manifest themselves with any such endeavor, and

new ways to engage them can perhaps be devised. Making presentations and discussion forums available on demand were the first steps that we took. Thinking ahead, the challenge for such endeavors may lie in bending the conference form to the real demands of life. A concurrent stream of podcasts, for example, might be one way to acknowledge and work with the possibility that participation in a virtual meeting may take place in the context of a morning commute, an afternoon walk, or an evening in the kitchen.

Radicalizing conference access is a real possibility. Euro-American anthropology conferences are dominated by Euro-American anthropologists and Euro-American anthropology. SCA biennials in 2014 and 2016 were 86 to 88 percent American, for example, with most of the remaining participants from Canada and a handful of other countries. In the face of mounting calls to acknowledge world anthropologies and local traditions of anthropological knowledge, the academic conference is a crucial locus for exploring alternative practices. Presenters at Displacements hailed from 21 different countries and many scholarly institutions far from the conventional orbit of Euro-American anthropology. Nodes in the global South were hosted by institutions including the Middle East Technical University in Turkey, the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bangalore, the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Peru, Seoul National University, and the University of the Free State in South Africa. The organizer of a local node in Quetzaltenango, where Displacements was rendered into Spanish by a live translator, had this to say about the chance to take part in the conference:

I live in a city of Guatemala that does not have access to the latest information regarding anthropology and social sciences. Despite the fact that we have universities that teach these areas, there are few events in which students and professionals in general can have access to up-to-date research and broad perspectives regarding their fields. This is a good way to decentralize knowledge and to expose students and professionals to different perspectives and realities.

Access can be conceived in other terms as well. Participants in Displacements included activists and others from outside of academic anthropology who were curious about the field and eager to tune in without having to pay exorbitant sums for travel and registration; attendees with restricted mobility who could attend the conference from environments

most conducive to their physical well-being; and a number of students sharing preliminary findings for feedback while still in the midst of research abroad. In one case, someone had prepared a vivid and engaging presentation almost entirely on a mobile phone. These were all affirming developments. On the other hand, the challenge that Addis Ababa node organizer Anais Maro raised in her presentation was also a serious one, a challenge that ought to be taken seriously in any future effort of this kind:

A global conference such as this one is an opportunity to broadcast the specificity of Ethiopian field work. However, even if the movements of people can generate a sense that Ethiopia is connected to the global world, access to the Internet and film technology, educational barriers, and academic attitudes all make it difficult for scholars to participate. Could we think of ways to better integrate non-Western contexts into dematerialized conferences?

The panel that Maro organized on the theme of Ethiopian displacements stood out as the only panel submission composed entirely of presentations from scholars based outside the global North. One can imagine future iterations of a hybrid conference where node organizers are invited not only to screen conference panels and presentations locally, but also to organize such panels of their own to share with the conference as a whole. One can imagine captions made available in multiple languages simultaneously, or other ways of reaching beyond the Anglophone linguistic universe in which Displacements was situated. One can imagine ways of anticipating and responding to bandwidth problems and other technical complications that might hamper node organizing in other Southern contexts. And one can imagine ways of staging spaces for the exchange of publications and other materials between local and regional communities of anthropology: a virtual press room or book exhibit, for example, with space for open-access books, journals, and other accessible means of anthropological publication.

“Many of the conversations in the SCA and cultural anthropology are still shaped by the demands of the American academy,” one participant observed. “To be more accessible, the SCA will need to make significant efforts to articulate with anthropological communities globally.” Experiments like Displacements can be occasions to pursue this aspiration, to open up space for more lateral and equitable movements of anthropological knowledge

and insight. The discipline cannot be [decolonized](#) without reinventing its basic modes of publication and communication; if nothing else, the fierce debates in recent months over enduring forms of hierarchy and exploitation in the field have proved this true. With these and other imperatives in mind, it is high time to displace the form of the conference itself.

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