

DOUGLAS COLLEGE LIBRARY

DIGITAL DAZE

"I found myself wanting to explore the connection..."

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About: *Digital Daze* is a zine for reflecting on the histories we have with the technologies we reached for to make it through the semester during the COVID-19 pandemic. In it, you'll find narrative prose, poetry, and visual art about experiences of navigating the online world and the impacts that this virtual space can have on our psyche and our bodies. These experiences and their impacts might have been harmful or healing - or both.

Why? The genesis for this zine emerged from a 2021 study conducted at Douglas College by the iMPACTS research team that sought to understand the social impacts of COVID-19 on students. Students shared a lot about their experiences with online learning, including: harassment, fear of being recorded/surveilled, finding confidence and control, boredom, and more. The rapid shift was rapid - not a lot of time to consider what or how we feel, and yet, we felt it nonetheless. Even if students today are part of a generation that grew up with THE INTERNET, we are still in unfamiliar terrain. The study is over, but we wanted to explore more, so, we thought, why not a zine?

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Holding Flattened Space?

Jennifer Jill Fellows, PhD

In early 2021, I attended my first Zoom funeral. I was strangely optimistic. The funeral was for my great aunt who had lived a long and joyful life. In normal times, without lockdowns and Zoom, I wouldn't have attended her funeral. I would have wanted to, but it wouldn't have been financially possible for me to take the few days off work required to fly out of province to attend. I would have been alone with my grief.

So, it was with a sense of gratitude that I prepared for the funeral to come. I got myself a comforting pot of tea, and some tissues. And I "Zoomed in".

At first, it was nice. There was a religious service in line with my aunt's wishes. There were pre-recorded eulogies from her grandchildren and other family members. I saw the faces of many people I hadn't seen in years, and a lot of wonderful memories were shared. And then, a little over an hour later, the formal part of the funeral ended. The minister closed the service with a prayer and told us all that we should feel free to "mingle" in the Zoom room as long as we needed.

And that was that.

A sudden awkwardness descended. Because you can't really mingle in a single Zoom room. You can't have small, intimate conversations. No one wanted to talk over anyone else. So no one talked.

I've been thinking a lot about what it means to grieve during Covid. Because we have a hell of a lot to grieve. In the summer of 2020, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were both the latest in a long line of victims of racist police brutality in the United States. In the Winter of 2022, Ukraine was invaded by Russian forces. And of course, this is only scratching the surface of the global causes of grief.

Closer to home, in the summer of 2021, BC saw a heatwave that killed 595 people and resulted in the town of Lytton reaching unprecedented temperatures of 50 degrees Celsius, before literally burning to the ground. In the fall of 2021, the town of Abbotsford flooded, drowning livestock and destroying many people's livelihoods. And the opioid crisis continues to escalate, claiming more and more lives each year. Again, this is by no means a full enumeration of current provincial causes of grief.

And having all that grief against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic only heightens the pain. Because, in addition to climate change and global and local injustices and tragedies, all of us are

collectively grieving the loss of 2019.

No matter how the pandemic has affected you, it has affected you. And 2019 is never coming back. It is natural to respond to that fact with grief. In addition, as of the date of this writing, 40,799 Canadians and over five million people worldwide have died from Covid, to say nothing of the number of people who have become disabled through the still poorly understood phenomenon of Long Covid.

So, how do we process this grief in digital space? Complicating this question is the fact that in mainstream North American culture, we were not terribly good at processing grief even before Covid. Mortician and author Caitlin Doughty (2017) writes that grief requires what she calls "holding space." Doughty tells us that "to hold the space is to create a ring of safety around the family and friends of the dead person, providing a place where they can grieve openly and honestly, without fear of being judged" (232). She goes on to lament that, in her experiences as a mortician in the United States, there is a social tendency not to hold space. "In our Western culture, where are we held in our grief? . . . the most vulnerable time in our lives is a gauntlet of awkward obstacles" (233). And this reference to "awkward obstacles" so resonates with me now as I think about the awkward attempts to comfort my great aunt's immediate family over Zoom.

When grief over Covid mortality, American school shootings, climate change, and international war shares a timeline alongside jokes made in bad taste, memes, political rants, and pictures of "nailed it" baking, where is the space held? Especially as, alongside grief, we must also deal with denial - Covid denial, climate change denial, and all the other ways in which grief is invalidated in the very spaces in which it is expressed.

Historian Debra Caplan, in a Twitter thread, draws parallels between current North American attitudes towards Covid-19 and the 1918 pandemic in the USA. Drawing on work by Alfred Crosby, Caplan notes that the 1918 pandemic was one in which there was no space for grief. The pandemic was accompanied by what Caplan calls a "collective forgetting," resulting in a wide-spread intentional ignoring of the devastation being unleashed even as it was happening. Caplan tells us that "[m]ore Americans died in the 1918 pandemic than in all 20th century wars combined," but there is only one American memorial to these deaths. There are very few poems, paintings, literature, or music exploring the experience of living through this pandemic, or the grief that must have accompanied that life.

So why is there so little art for the 1918 pandemic? And where is the art for today?

In answer to this question, Caplan asks us another. She asks, "[h]ow can you tell a story about something that isn't acknowledged as really happening? How can you process the pain and loss of a mass health catastrophe when those in power keep telling the public that everything is fine and normal?"

And she answers: "You can't. And you don't."

Ironically, this Twitter thread from Caplan appeared alongside a mash of other things in my feed, including people celebrating the end of Covid and the beginning of travel, those comparing Covid to the common cold and insisting that "it's over," and those gratefully thanking our public health officials for shepherding us through the last two years, eager to put all of this behind us.

So, I am left wondering, how do we grieve in digital space? In the unnatural confines of a Zoom room, or the cacophony of Twitter? Is holding space possible?

In early 2021, at my great aunt's Zoom funeral, I watched the screen slowly fill up with darkness as my family members awkwardly left this flattened space, typing condolences into the chat before hitting that bright red button. And when the funeral was over, I sat in my living room, with my cold mug of tea, and I cried.

Alone, with my grief.

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The Poetry Reading

Christine Fojas

I. The Listener

There's an intimacy of voice
passing through comma-shaped
metal and plastic nestled
in the curve of your ear.
Someone's poetry leaping
from page to throat to air wave.

(You don't pretend to understand
how sound transmits digitally,
crosses borders and oceans,
via the magic and mystery of wi-fi.)

It's been months since you walked out
your front door. The new house
is starting to fit you, an oversized coat
you are growing into. You are in bed,
and simultaneously elsewhere,
a space unbound by four walls.

You keep the camera turned off;
an old photo of you smirks
from the screen. Like a mask
you inhabit. You are plugged in,
but cyberspace doesn't glow neon
tonight. It's a gathering
around the fire.

II. The Speaker

You take an old poem, dust
it off and make it real
in a way it had never been before.

You inject power into your voice,
imagine a source of courage
like an extra battery pack
joined to your spine. You imagine
rooms upon rooms blooming
with your language. The way
something you say passes through
the liquid throat into open air,
collides with the dazzling world.

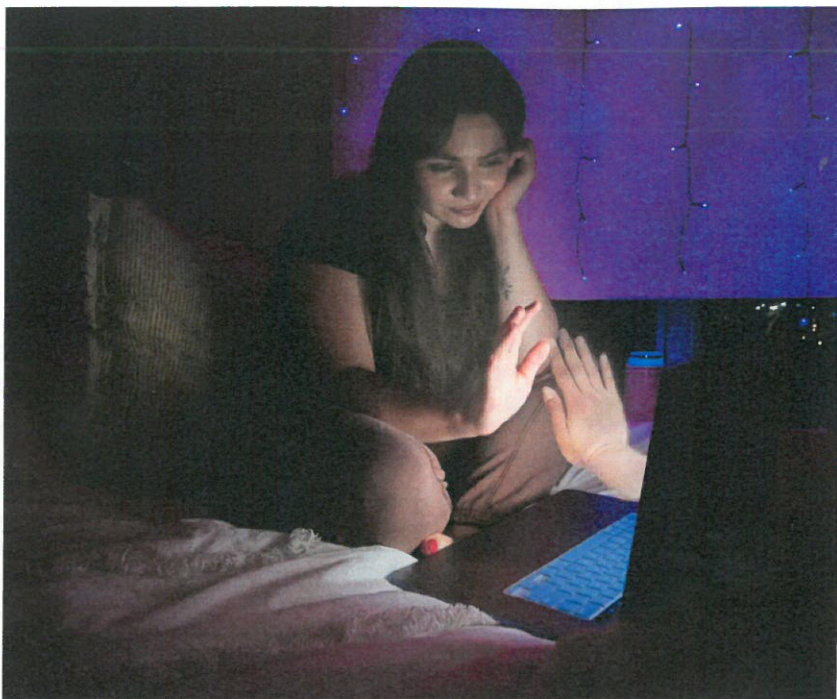
III. The Moment

Passes. More moments stitched
in digital time. The wind interleaved
with children's voices
in the background,
with feedback, and noises
of passing cars. Poetry
of the moment. A passing back
and forth from mouth to ear,
from hand to eye. You inhabit
the moment. (I and you and we)
Wearing and worn, now
only the traces of memory.



Connection in a Contact-less World

Jimena Savarain Odria



I decided to go back to study psychology in the Fall of 2020, in the midst of the pandemic. I had not attended Douglas College before, nor had I taken any classes online at any other institution I had been at before.

In the past, meeting new people and connecting with peers has been a big part of my academic life. After all, we are people; we are made to connect. And socializing is a big part of college and university life. But due to the pandemic, it was clear to me, and probably everyone else, that this significant part of college life would not be the same as we all knew it before the pandemic.

So, as expected, meeting people in the online classroom setting was difficult. Yet, somehow, I remained optimistic and looked out for people I would want to be friends with.

Unexpectedly (and oddly enough naturally), I ended up meeting a very special person to me, my long-term partner and best friend, in this quite odd social setting.



Mina's Online Learning Experience



Mina had wanted to make changes in her life and begin a new career within the fitness industry. She felt confident in the direction she was headed as she had many years of experience in sports. As an ex female athlete, Mina always looked for ways to challenge herself. Mina was captain of her wrestling and rugby team growing up, which allowed her to push gender boundaries from an early age. This was what drove Mina to take a personal training course in 2020. Mina wanted to inspire people to make better decisions in life; fitness and health always interested her. After two weeks of in-person learning, Mina and the rest of her classmates were forced to isolate at home and begin the process of online learning – something Mina was unfamiliar with. This raised a great deal of anxiety, as Mina had just returned to learning after a four year break from college.



Accessibility

During COVID-19 lockdowns, I wasn't prepared to attend class from my one-bedroom basement with a noisy generator right next to the only bedroom/office/closet/storage space available. Never mind our crappy internet connection and the old laptop I hadn't laid eyes on since winter of 2016. For the first year, my bed and sometimes my living room—with my partner staying quiet next to me for 3 hours—was my office. After a while, the old laptop started to glitch. I had to quickly resolve the issue, otherwise I would miss class. I contemplated buying a used laptop, but what was the point? I couldn't trust that it wouldn't die like the old one. That's when I purchased a new iPad with the money I didn't have but somehow convinced myself that I did because my visa spending limit said so. If it wasn't for all the online learning, I could've waited to buy a new device. The college offered no guidance on what accessibility options were being provided to students. If the school rented out laptops, there was no way I could find out unless I was contacted. As a new student, I felt disconnected from counsellors and advisors because everything took place via email and zoom meetings. It took me a year or so to fully figure out the online system. Without in-person service desks, I felt lost.

Historically, the fitness industry has been considered masculine; over time, it has experienced an increase in female athletes and trainers. Still, there remain misconceptions in the fitness industry about gender inequality. Mina's interest was to push for better health and not for what society has said the "male" and "female" body should look like.

You might be wondering how this relates to online learning... well, when my female classmates and I tried to participate in school, we felt overpowered: our sentences were cut short and we would have ideas mansplained to us. Stereotypical jokes were made about women's body shape, body type, and appropriate gendered exercise. This made it hard to participate in group settings, as the instructor could only attend to one cluster at a time. When we were given partners for a group assignment, my male partner insisted that I finish it. I felt uncomfortable telling him no, so instead I lied and said "maybe, if I finish in time." We had all shared our personal phone numbers at the beginning of the course. When it got close to the due date, I received an unexpected call from the same partner that I had been paired with. He asked for the completed package and I lied once again, saying that it wasn't complete and that I was probably going to ask the instructor for an extension. I was surprised by my own actions. I knew how outspoken I could be but, in that course, I felt defeated at times. I thought maybe if we were in-person I'd have the guts to speak up and tell him I'm not comfortable. Maybe it was the masculine power dominance in society that led me to act and think that way.



Mansplaining





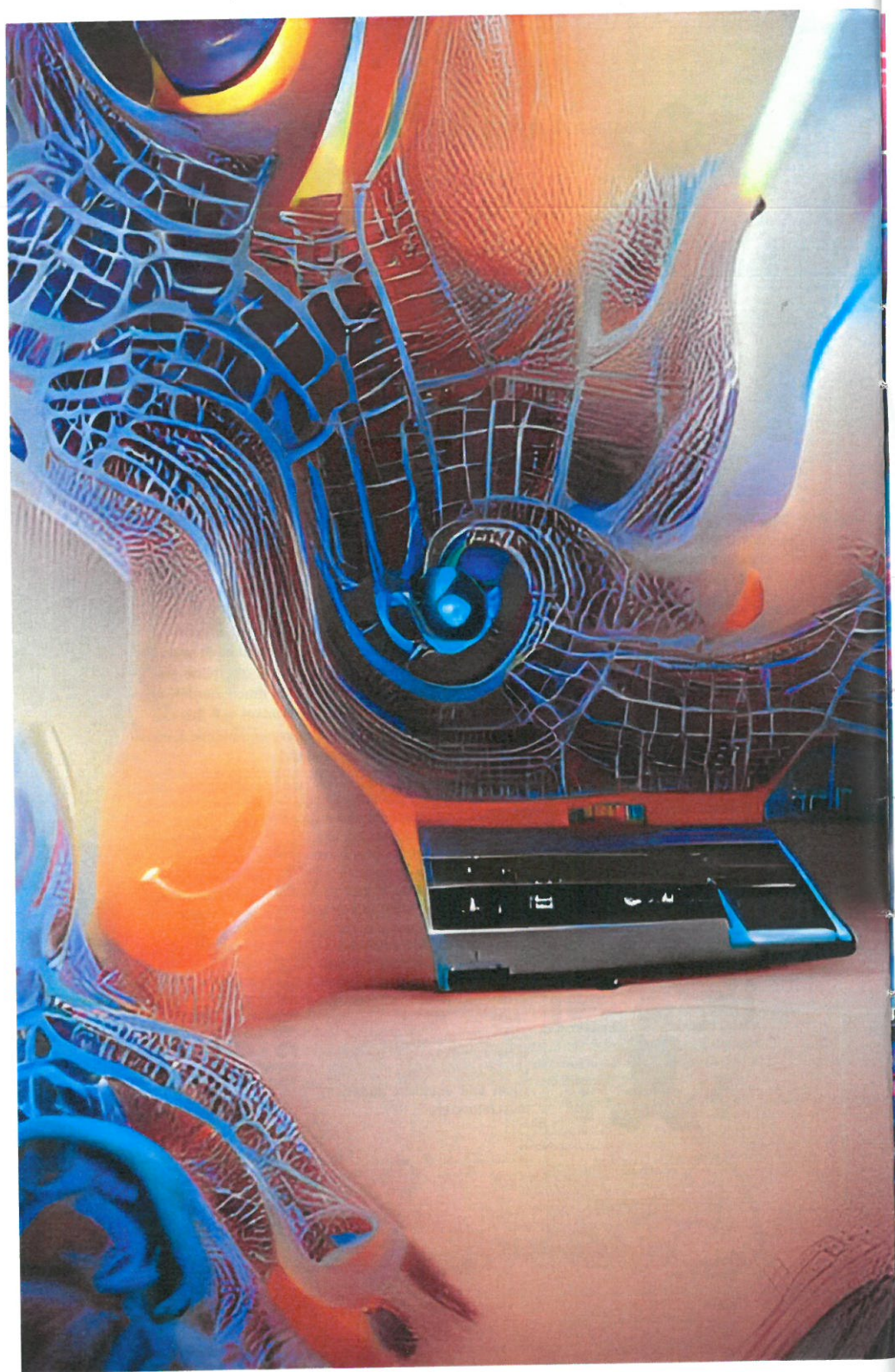
To put things in perspective, we had to sit for three hours listening to our instructor and we couldn't watch any of the exercises we were learning about. This made it hard to understand certain things. The rate of my success was based entirely on my own research. Due to online learning, I no longer had the opportunity to ask questions in person. At times, we would speed through a three hour session because no one felt compelled to participate. Class discussion was harder. I felt uncomfortable participating in one-on-one live sessions as I felt a gender power imbalance. At times, I would hear passive jokes, which would have been harder for someone to say in a class where the instructor was present. I found myself skipping class more often as everything felt so dull and meaningless. Being able to physically sit in class ensures a type of discipline that online learning and technology cannot deliver. Virtual learning is much harder to continue for a long period of time as all responsibilities fall on the student and this can be overwhelming for people that don't have the space or the necessary equipment. Lack of access to school resources and faculty made the experience stressful.



Without a doubt, the COVID-19 outbreak and isolation was one of the hardest things society has had to endeavour. However, it gave me hours of contemplation, which led me down a different path. After my unpleasant online learning experience in fitness, I thought back to a time when I was excited about class, a time when I felt heard and understood. That led me to sociology. Although making changes to society's health was important to me, I figured making a more equal and equitable society is most important.

Career Switch





Epilogue

Asher Faerstein, MA

"I did not experience sexual and online harassment during covid, but I had [experienced heavy harassment on the internet] when I was younger, which have [sic] greatly impacted my life... For that reason, anything done online for me or unnecessary exposure of my face is very unsettling." - **2021 iMPACTS survey participant**

The mass shift to online learning—indeed, online *being*—has happened without much consideration for people's unique histories in virtual space. For many, the pandemic-induced shift has felt like an attempt to regulate a place that is by nature unregulated and boundary-less, and thus in some cases anxiety-provoking, uncomfortable, lonely, or unsafe. The superimposition of the formal academic world onto the vastness of the internet (and, conversely, the making-virtual of our typically in-person social rituals) has created tensions and convergences.

This zine brings together a diversity of experiences that explore this phenomenon, including the disconnection and loneliness that can manifest in coming together on Zoom to grieve, the way online performance can take on its own kind of life, how connection can still blossom in virtual classrooms, and how disconnection and other pitfalls of online learning can lead to unexpected alternative pathways. It is clear that there are a variety of perspectives on what kind of impact this shift has had on the experiences of students, staff, and faculty.

Moving forward, it is important to think about the implications of the digital classroom. Much of the reported harassment experienced by students who participated in the 2021 iMPACTS survey was perpetrated by students, but a good quarter was perpetrated by instructors. Not only do institutions need to incorporate a consideration of the complex histories that students show up with when it comes to online learning, but they must also hold instructors accountable and provide more training. We also need to think about the level of accessibility that online learning has afforded to some and consider how we might continue to thoughtfully incorporate virtual accessibility into the academic experience.





Contributors

Asher Faerstein, MA (editor) is a queer and trans interdisciplinary writer and aspiring psychotherapist from Montreal. Their first computer was an HP Compaq Presario desktop that lived in their room. On it, they inhabited worlds (chat rooms, web pages, RPGs) that affirmed parts of their identity that couldn't yet exist in the "real world."

Jennifer Jill Fellows, PhD is a Philosophy Instructor at Douglas College and a 2022 Podcasting Fellow of the Marc Sanders Foundation for Public Philosophy. She remembers first encountering a computer at the age of three in her parents' living room. Her dad had borrowed the computer from work for the weekend, because computers were far too expensive for most families to own.

Christine Fojas is a Filipino-Canadian writer and library technician whose work has appeared in places such as Ricepaper Magazine, Kissing Dynamite Poetry and Marias at Sampaguitas Online Literary Magazine. She is part of the Douglas College Library Zine Collective. She can be found on Twitter and Instagram @chrisfojas.

Jimena Savarain Odria (designer) is a psychology student and peer tutor at Douglas College. Originally from Peru, she immigrated to Canada in 2011 and has lived in metro Vancouver for half her life now. She was introduced to her first computer at the age of four, where she remembers playing old PC games with her father in his home office in her hometown in Lima, Peru.

Lisa Smith, PhD is a college professor in sociology at Douglas College. She teaches courses about gender and society, Canadian sociology, and surveillance. She loves to learn more about the social aspects of menstruation and reproductive health through research, as well as gender-based violence prevention. When she is not professing, she finds joy in the ukulele (playing it) and piano (playing that too) and communing with nature through hikes in the woods.

The anonymous author of Mina's story is a student at Douglas College. Her favourite hobbies are cycling, skiing, walking, working out, and reading. She lives life through a philosophical and sociological lens. Her parents bought her first laptop in grade 11 - it was a bulky HP laptop with a touchscreen, decorated with many random stickers. She remembers making videos and editing photos on it all day long.

The full-page images used in this zine were created using the AI art generator Night Cafe. <https://creator.nightcafe.studio>





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