# THE DISTRIBUTE 2020 PLAYBOOK

Mayanthi L. Fernando
E. Gabriel Dattatreyan
Arjun Shankar
Paul Christians
Andrea Muehlebach

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**Part I: Overview**

Distribute 2020, the biennial conference of the Society for Cultural Anthropology and the Society for Visual Anthropology,[1] took place on May 7, 8, and 9 2020. The conference featured three days of **streaming pre-recorded content** (24 panels plus 3 keynotes) on a **global schedule** (i.e. timed for an audience spread across multiple time zones); a **Virtual Hallway** for live post-panel Q&A; a **Film Festival** with 21 films on-demand (May 7 to 14); an interactive forum called **La Plaza**; and **Coffee With…** (an occasion for junior scholars to meet senior scholars and press editors).

We approached Distribute 2020, and virtual multimodal conferencing more generally, as an intellectual, ethical, and political project, with the potential to 1) increase accessibility for scholars with limited or no resources for conference travel and/or constrained by travel bans and visa restrictions and/or limited by ableist infrastructures; 2) reduce the carbon footprint of academic conferences; and 3) redistribute conventional hierarchies of knowledge production and dissemination so as to enable scholarship produced outside the North Atlantic to reach a global audience. Moreover, unlike the traditional conference model, which relies almost exclusively on the in-person paper, virtual conferencing allows for a different assemblage of voice, image, data visualization, and sound, organized as pre-recorded content. A multimodal approach to conferencing has the potential to offer a radically different kind of anthropological knowledge, in its form, its production, and its dissemination by enabling creativity and experimentation not usually found at place-based conferences. We therefore understand multimodality as integral not only to Distribute 2020, but also to the future of virtual conferencing.

Our vision for the conference is articulated in the [Welcome](#) section of the Distribute 2020 website. This document[2] is meant to serve as more of a "behind the scenes" articulation of our planning and organization, including how we built on the first iteration of the SCA-SVA biennial (Displacements, in April 2018), what worked and what did not, and what needs to be thought about, not only for future iterations of a SCA-SVA biennial but for any kind of virtual conference that puts multimodal content front and center as the means to foster intimate and stimulating engagement within and beyond an academic community of practice. We see this document, then, as a "playbook" for others interested in virtual multimodal conferencing, and we see this endeavor as part of an ongoing, collaborative effort to undo conventional hierarchies of knowledge production and dissemination.

**Part II: Basic Technical Infrastructure and Registration**

**Technical Infrastructure:** Rather than use a dedicated virtual-conferencing vendor, as other major scholarly associations have done, we envisioned what we wanted, then built the technical conference infrastructure out of already existing technologies that were repurposed and recombined to fit our needs. In this way, we tried to make sure that technological decisions served the vision of the conference instead of adapting the conference's needs and format to the available technology. We built a dedicated

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[1] The SCA and SVA are both sections of the American Anthropological Association. Both have long held regular place-based biennials. Since 2018, the associations have worked together on a joint virtual biennial, and anticipate doing so for 2022.

[2] The lead authors of this Playbook are Mayanthi L. Fernando, E. Gabriel Dattatreyan, and Arjun Shankar. Paul Christians added elements on privacy and accessibility, and Andrea Muehlebach contributed to an early draft.

conference website on WordPress, hosted by the University of Toronto's servers; used a UStream channel via the University of California, Santa Cruz to stream panels during the three days of the conference; used multiple personal Vimeo accounts for on-demand films in the Film Festival; used a Zoom pro account (via UC Santa Cruz) for the Virtual Hallway; used UC Santa Cruz's Vimeo pro account for our overflow room (which streamed the Virtual Hallway); used the University of Toronto's archiving platform MyMedia to store panels before the conference and then archive them for on-demand viewing after the conference; and used several free and paid WordPress plugins, including Ultimate Member for La Plaza, the website's interactive forum. Only registered conference participants could access the conference Stream, Film Festival, La Plaza, and links and passwords to the Virtual Hallway.

**Registration:** Conference participants could either register as individuals via the AAA website or be registered as part of an institutional node. Distribute 2020 had **850 registrants** and **1033 active participants** (i.e. people who created an account on La Plaza, which was necessary to access the conference stream, film festival, and interactive features).[3] There were more active participants than registrants because we issued 300 to 400 usernames and passwords for the website directly to nodes (in Thessaly, Copenhagen, Vienna, Toronto, Vancouver, and Berlin); since many nodes were comprised of undergraduate students, node organizers thought it would be too cumbersome for them to use the AAA registration system. Whether registered via the AAA or directly by the conference team as part of a node, all registrants received a unique username and password to log in to the conference website. Upon their first login, registrants completed a user profile by adding a few details such as interests, affiliation, and memberships. The profile setup process took 3-5 minutes and enabled participants to access conference-only content and the website's interactive features. Post-conference survey data suggests that registration via the AAA was either unproblematic or only somewhat cumbersome, and we recommend using one registration system for all participants (with pre-set waivers or something similar for node participants).

### Part III: Planning and Organization

Distribute 2020 built on [Displacements](#), the 2018 inaugural experiment by the SCA and SVA in hybrid virtual/in-person conferencing, and the first major virtual anthropological conference ever held.[4] Planning and conceptualization for Distribute began in April 2019, with an initial SCA conference organization team of Mayanthi Fernando and Andrea Muehlebach (both on the SCA Executive Board). In July 2019, Arjun Shankar and Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan (both on the SVA Executive Board) joined the biennial organization team, and by August 2019 we had collectively determined the general conference theme ("Distribute"). In August 2019, Paul Christians came on board as our Technical Advisor, and he soon became a fifth conference organizer (and is the student representative on the SCA Executive Board). He also designed and built our website.

As we planned and implemented the conference, we used Displacements as our basic model, though we made a number of changes to build on, extend, and improve that model:

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[3] Our registration data is drawn from numbers provided by the AAA; analytics from La Plaza; and Google Analytics for website traffic. Later in this document, we also draw from results from a survey we sent to Distribute 2020 participants (that had a 20% response rate).
[4] See Anand Pandian's "[Reflections on #displace2018](#)" for more on Displacements.

1) **International recruitment of and investment in panels:** Displacements featured more than a dozen viewing nodes in the Global South, where viewers gathered together to watch streaming conference content. We re-imagined those viewing nodes as *producers* of conference content, i.e. responsible for producing panels, and we actively planned for and recruited panels from outside the North Atlantic. Indeed, about a third of the conference content was curated by the conference organizers (i.e. we actively reached out to colleagues and colleagues of colleagues), with panels coming from scholars and activists located in Delhi, Lahore, South Africa, Nigeria, Kurdistan, Mexico, Ecuador, Bosnia, Greece, and Italy. We also solicited a set of unusual keynotes, notably from Miyarrka Media (an Aboriginal media collective from Australia) and Dalit Camera (an anti-caste activist organization in India). This solicitation process was integral to the shape Distribute 2020 took and contributed significantly to its international scope, global reach, and push to think outside the confines of North Atlantic academic anthropology. After recruiting and accepting panels, we also invested a significant amount of time in communicating with panelists, including helping them with technical questions and needs, as well as captioning. Finally, we raised funds for these panels' various technical needs. In 2018, Displacements had received $3500 from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for its Global South viewing nodes; anticipating the additional costs for panelists who would now be producing multimodal work, we applied for and received $7500 from the Wenner-Gren, which we distributed across 9 panels and 2 keynotes produced outside the North Atlantic.

2) **Multimodality:** With the SVA as full partners in this collaborative experiment, we were better attuned to the value and possibilities of multimodal scholarship that virtual conferencing can offer, and we spent much of the planning stages of the conference determining how to maximize the potential of multimodality. We scaffolded the production and post-production process, providing several support mechanisms for panelists to realize their vision and produce engaging pre-recorded content. Recognizing that many in our scholarly community, as well as those we solicited beyond its borders, had never produced multimodal content and/or did not have the audiovisual editing skills to partake in this form of conferencing, we invested a significant amount of time in helping panelists conceptualize a presentation or panel in multimodal form, hosting four virtual tech hangouts in February and early March 2020 for panelists. Building on the "Participant Toolkit" for Displacements, we also commissioned four [How-To videos](#) to provide our panelists with basic technical overviews. We further discuss our approach to multimodality below, in "Soliciting and Producing Multimodal Panels."

3) **Panels rather than individual presentations:** Whereas Displacements solicited individual presentations rather than only full panels, we asked that panel organizers propose and produce whole panels. This saved us time (Displacements' organizers had to combine and curate numerous individual presentations into panels), but more importantly, it produced creative and collaborative panels that were imagined from their inception as an interwoven web of presentations, and even as one singular multimodal piece of work. Indeed, some of the panels we received were essentially short films. Asking for panels rather than individual presentations also compelled individual presenters to imagine their work as always in conversation with their fellow panelists, producing more collaboration amongst panel presenters than is usually the case.

4) **Collaboration:** We made collaboration a major anchor of Distribute 2020. After all, if the purpose of virtual conferencing is, in part, to overturn conventional hierarchies, then collaborative work must be embraced as an ethic and a practice. We say more about collaboration below (in "Conference Goals and

Outcomes"), but essentially, while specific individuals took on specific tasks (usually according to their expertise), all decision-making was done collectively by the five members of the organizational team. The technical infrastructure of the conference was also a collaborative exercise: as noted, we used the University of Toronto (Andrea Muehlebach's home institution) servers to host the conference website and Toronto's archiving platform (MyMedia) to archive panels after the conference, and we drew on UC Santa Cruz (Mayanthi Fernando's home institution) ITS labor and expertise, its UStream contract and channels for the conference stream, and its Vimeo contract for the overflow room.

**5) Improved interaction:** Distribute 2020 was much more interactive across participants than Displacements, which largely relied on in-person nodes for in-person interaction, and on social media (essentially Twitter) for virtual cross-participant contact. We instituted two major new features for Distribute 2020: a Virtual Hallway via Zoom, and an interactive platform we called La Plaza, both of which we discuss below, in "Key Elements of Distribute 2020." We also relied on Twitter for person-to-person engagement about panels and films, and about virtual conferencing more generally, and we featured the running #distribute2020 hashtag thread on our website's mainpage.

**6) Improved accessibility:** Building on Displacements, we paid significant attention to accessibility, which we conceived of, and therefore operationalized, in multiple ways. First, every single panel was captioned or subtitled (in English), either by the panelists themselves or, if they were unable, by our team. This was extremely labor-intensive, but it was an important part of our ethic of democratizing access.

Second, we made the entire website bilingual, with all text in English and Spanish (which required paying for translations from English to Spanish, as well as time to translate before anything could be posted on the website). We made a related decision to present the languages side-by-side on each web page, rather than developing a dedicated website for each, on the grounds that separate often becomes unequal. As a result, one Distribute translation team member, a Spanish native speaker from outside the USA, remarked: "I feel like this is the first time we've been represented in this context in a hundred years of the discipline."

Third, the website's design included specific measures to broaden aural and visual access by implementing common best practices from the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, such as adding Alt text for images, creating screen-reader friendly site code/syntax, using responsive sizing (i.e. for desktop, tablet, and mobile screen sizes), and adding visual acuity tools. Wherever possible, we picked technologies and software that were internationally available and free to users so that users only needed a device with Internet access and a standard web browser.

Finally, we instituted a sliding pay scale, with $10 for "anyone and everyone" and $50 and $100 options for those who could afford to pay more and essentially subsidize other participants. We expand on all these issues below.

**7) Concern for personal security, data protection, and privacy:** Increased synchronous and asynchronous interactions among the conference participants required thinking carefully about ethics, security, and privacy as overlapping concerns specific to online communities. Panel content was limited to logged-in registrants to help mitigate concerns about making sensitive research material public online.

We developed [a suite of ethical policies](#) (conviviality, harassment, security, and fair use) to which all participants implicitly agreed in becoming part of the conference community, such that violating any of these policies could result in the cancellation of registration (without a refund) and thereby loss of access to conference content. Creating user profiles in addition to registering meant that users joined the conference on an opt-in rather than opt-out basis. Technically, users could maintain and update a private password; edit and delete data they posted to the website; remove their account entirely; report harmful or unwanted content; and choose how to interact and be contacted as well as what information to make public/private. All intra-site discussions and messaging were visible only to logged-in users. The organizers also set up a limited access, dedicated email for reporting harassment and, as a formal section of the AAA, drew on the knowledge, resources, and institutional authority of that umbrella organization. Lastly, we implemented a range of additional privacy measures for the conference's Virtual Hallway and La Plaza features (see below in "The Key Elements of Distribute 2020").

**8) Increased revenue and institutional buy-in:** In 2018, Displacements raised $3500 from Johns Hopkins University and $3500 from the Wenner-Gren Foundation (earmarked for viewing nodes in the Global South). Distribute 2020 was able to increase both intramural and extramural funding: the two major funders of the conference were the University of Toronto (~US$10,000) and Wenner-Gren ($US7500), with additional contributions from Stanford University ($1500) and UC Santa Cruz ($1000). Distribute also brought in more revenue via registration ($12,890) than Displacements before it ($9860).
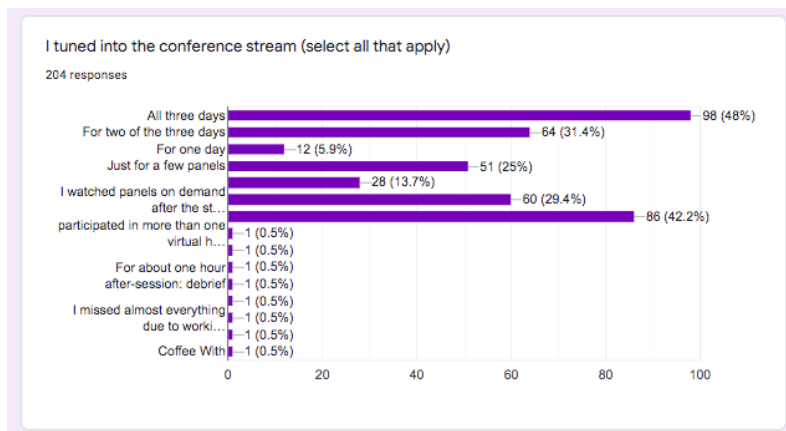
With regard to the substantial contribution by University of Toronto, it had just pledged to roll out a university-wide plan to reduce its carbon emissions. Distribute 2020 fit into this plan, making funding available, hence the large infusion of funds; this gave us a cushion to move forward with the conference knowing we could pay for tech and personnel even if registration did not generate enough revenue to do so. It is unlikely that this level of intramural funds will be available for another iteration of the SCA-SVA biennial (or a similar professional conference). However, when total costs were subtracted from total revenue (registration fees plus intramural and extramural support), Distribute generated a $6500 surplus. That is to say, if Toronto had contributed $3500 instead of $10,000 (i.e. what John Hopkins contributed for Displacements in 2018), Distribute 2020 would still have broken even. What this suggests is that a model in which an extramural source like the Wenner-Gren continues to fund certain panels and multiple institutions contribute $1000 to $3500 toward other conference costs makes this kind of distributed, multimodal virtual conferencing feasible. We discuss our budget and the financial feasibility of future conferences later, in "Budget."

**A note about the pandemic:** Although Distribute 2020 was designed from its inception as a virtual multimodal conference, it was nonetheless impacted by the coronavirus pandemic in one significant area: local nodes. We had planned for the conference as a fully hybrid virtual and in-person gathering, with local nodes across the world where participants would gather not only to view the conference, but also to join in related activities like workshops, reading circles, and group dinners before, during, and after the conference. Indeed, many of the panelists who had submitted panels had planned to continue their conversations through various events parallel to the conference, from Santiago de Chile to Bologna to Delhi. These nodes were meant to conjure the lively in-person sociality that remains one of the best aspects of conference-going. The pandemic and restrictions on in-person gatherings made those local nodes largely impossible. At the same time, the pandemic has changed how we imagine sociality itself,

opening up possibilities for lively virtuality and enabling new kinds of collectivities to emerge, and we were no different: the pandemic compelled us as organizers to focus on creating vibrant and democratic virtual spaces for engagement – like the Virtual Hallway and Coffee With – and participants made these virtual spaces of exchange a key element of Distribute 2020.

The inability to have in-person nodes meant that the vast majority of viewers were tuning in individually to Distribute 2020. It is impossible to calculate the effects of the pandemic on viewership for the conference. On the one hand, many more people were stuck at home with the time to watch a conference, potentially increasing viewership. On the other, screen fatigue and the oversaturation of online platforms to conduct academic and personal life potentially decreased viewership.



We are heartened by the above survey results, which show that 48% of respondents attended all three days of the conference, and 31% attended two of the three days. This means that almost 80% of survey respondents attended 2 or 3 days of the conference, a significant percentage for a virtual conference at a time when we were all oversaturated by online life. We believe this bodes well for virtual multimodal conferencing, though we want to emphasize the importance of creative, formally engaging content – the importance of multimodality – for sustaining this kind of viewership.

**Part IV: Key Organizational Recommendations**

Distribute 2020 built an infrastructure for multimodal virtual conferencing that largely worked. In order to replicate and build on its success, we have a few key recommendations with regard to the composition and expertise of any organizing team:

**1) Multimodality**: We recommend that the organizing team include at least two members who are adept at video editing. If accepted panelists have not previously worked in and through various forms of media, it is incumbent that the organizers have the capacity to provide the necessary support for them to complete their submissions. The two Distribute 2020 organizers with audio-visual expertise were tasked with teaching multimodality, editing panels and keynotes, adding captions, and the like, all of which constituted a considerable amount of time and labor. Organizers should expect that they will have to take on this kind of labor in future iterations of this conference or in other endeavors that center pre-recorded material and ensure they have the expertise and time to do so.

**2) Bilingualism**: We recommend at least one native or fluent Spanish speaker as part of the conference organizing team, and preferably two or more. This doesn't mean that translators should not be hired for various tasks. However, bilingual conference organizers would be able to communicate with Spanish-speaking panelists on email and in the Virtual Hallway, write text for short website updates, and otherwise provide oversight for website content translated into Spanish. Indeed, bilingual organizers would enable a more symmetrical relationship between Spanish and English, with conceptualization and translations across the two languages, rather than translation from English to Spanish (as was the case with Distribute 2020). As noted above, we presented Spanish and English text side-by-side on each web page, rather than developing a dedicated website for each language; that precluded setting up a specific, Spanish language space for participants, which might be a desirable goal in future iterations.

**3) Accessibility**: Along with multi-language support, "accessibility" remains a complex constellation of concerns and activities. We worked with a paid specialist to develop and implement our own accessibility statement and plan. While the results significantly improved on the SCA-SVA's 2018 conference, accessibility is a continual, evolving concern and will likely require organizers to actively seek out specialists with expertise in accessibility and education – particularly with regard to the specific aural and visual challenges online users may face as well as the relevant web standards and technological tools. It is important to note, too, that financial and technological accessibility are intertwined. Many international participants may not have access to the debit and credit cards (and their associated financial networks) linked to North American addresses typically used to facilitate online payments. Enabling global and/or alternative payment systems such as PayPal would significantly democratize and increase participation.

**4) Institutional support and collaboration**: These kinds of conferences will most likely rely on collaboration between institutions and on their willingness to experiment, so we recommend that at least two future conference organizers be located at institutions that can offer the kind of financial and technical support received by Distribute 2020. As we noted above, the University of Toronto, UC Santa Cruz, and Stanford committed funds to the conference. We were able to use the University of Toronto's technical infrastructure (servers and archiving platform) and UC Santa Cruz's UStream and Vimeo contracts. We also relied on the expertise and labor of various individuals in the University of Toronto's and UCSC's Information Technology departments. We were able to draw on this kind of financial, personnel, and in-kind support because two conference organizers were established associate professors at Toronto and UCSC and therefore had enough seniority at their respective institutions to access this support. A third conference organizer was a graduate student at a wealthy private institution (Stanford). Along with having a Technical Advisor as part of the conference team, this kind of institutional technical support – both the infrastructure and expertise – would need to be replicated for future conferences, as would financial contributions from multiple universities. In our experience, this should entail at least two conference organizers who are senior enough to access in-kind and/or financial support at institutions that are technically well-resourced and have high-level administration and/or staff invested in virtual multimodal conferencing.

## Part V: Soliciting and Producing Multimodal Panels

Recognizing the promise of multimodality that virtual conferencing enables, as well as the pitfalls of a virtual conference (for instance, one panel after another featuring talking heads reading conference papers), we invested significant energy soliciting and then enabling the production of multimodal panels that would be engaging and creative. Our timeline was as follows:

- **late November 2019:** Conference trailer and call for panels went live during the AAA annual meeting
- **January 5th:** Panel abstracts were due
- **January 19th:** Panels were selected and acceptances or rejections sent out
- **March 5th:** Deadline for complete panels
- **mid-April:** Many complete panels actually came in
- **third week of April:** Conference program scheduled
- **last week of April:** All panels and keynotes sent to UC Santa Cruz for uploading to UStream, followed by test run of entire 3-day conference
- **May 7th:** Conference began

**We used the following process to solicit, evaluate, accept, and program panels for Distribute 2020:**

1) Our initial Call for Panels, released in late November, asked for: a brief written overview of the proposed panel with regard to thematics and content (i.e. how it was related to the theme of the conference); a description of how panelists would make their individual presentations or the whole panel multimodal; and the names and affiliations of all the presenters. Proposals were due the first week of January and they varied widely. Some were detailed and precise, offering careful minute-by-minute summaries of what the final panel would include. Others were less detailed and, in some cases, quite vague regarding the scope of audio-visual engagement. Ultimately, we selected proposals that were conceptually vibrant and had a clear sense of what the final audio-visual content would be.

In retrospect, soon after the CFP to solicit these written proposals was released, it would have been a good idea for us, as organizers, to offer a video 'hangout' to clarify what we were looking for, particularly with regard to audio-visual production. For many academics who have never had to work in this format, the thought of producing multimodal content would, no doubt, have been intimidating. A group video call could have demystified the process somewhat, and potentially increased our pool of preliminary written submissions.

2) We sent out panel acceptance letters on January 19th and requested full panels (i.e. forty minutes of audio-visual content and captions) by March 5th, approximately two months before the conference began. At the time, we wanted to make sure we had enough time between the panel submission deadline and the conference to watch every panel in case the audiovisual components needed further revision.

3) Once we received full panels we asked, in some cases, for panelists to make any necessary visual and audio edits and then re-submit the panel. Although some panels came in by March 5th, for many panelists, six weeks was too short a turnaround time, and, with the pandemic in full effect globally by late March,

many panelists were only able to submit in mid- April. This gave us very little time to ask and offer technical support for any audiovisual revisions.

In retrospect, we should have allowed more time between the acceptance of proposals and the submission of complete panels, especially given that many of the panelists we invited to submit full panels had no previous multimodal experience, and many were located in the Global South, without access to technical equipment and infrastructure. We therefore recommend at least *four months* between notifying panelists of acceptance and the deadline for submitting complete panels, not only to account for any unforeseen challenges that might arise but also to create further opportunities to support panelists in the production and postproduction of content. This, of course, means that the deadline for initial panel proposals should be earlier, as should, in turn, the Call for Panels.

4) When all panels and keynotes were submitted and fully captioned, conference organizers planned three days of continuous streaming with a global audience spread across multiple time zones in mind. We received 24 panels, with an additional three keynotes we had commissioned. Perhaps because we had spent so much time working with panelists to enable them to fulfill their initial vision, all but one of the panel proposals we accepted were submitted as complete panels.

Because panels came in more than a month after our timeline (see above), and because we could not schedule a program until we were sure we would have the actual content, there was very little time between programming the schedule and the conference start-date. This meant that the schedule itself could not be released until two weeks before the conference, leaving less-than-ideal time for publicity. We recommend that schedule programming be done at least one month before the conference start-date.

Because many of our panelists were new to producing multimodal work, and because we understood Distribute 2020 as a pedagogical practice in the cultivation of multmodality as an analytic, **we offered the following teaching tools:**

**How-To Videos:** We produced four 5-minute "How-To" videos that built on the pedagogical toolkit created for participants during Displacements 2018. Each of the How-To videos sought to provide our panellists with basic technical overviews of image, sound, framing, lighting, interviewing, and the like.[5] We encourage future organizers to utilize these videos and to create new ones in order to build a repository of pedagogical tools that will foster multimodal scholarship.

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[5] These short videos were produced by Joyce Liu, a masters student at the University of Pennsylvania, in consultation with conference organizers Arjun Shankar and E. Gabriel Dattatreyan.

**Hangouts:** We hosted four synchronous Zoom "hangout" sessions during which accepted panelists could ask specific conceptual and technical questions regarding their panel projects.[6] These hangouts were essential for the completion of individual panels and we highly recommend something like this for any virtual multimodal conference. We noticed that in the first couple of sessions, many of the questions were conceptual: panelists wanted to understand how to place each panelist's project in conversation with others', what new forms/styles/storytelling techniques they might experiment with, and how to make an argument that maximized the affordances of audiovisual methods instead of merely lecturing. In later sessions panelists asked a broad array of technical questions, from how to edit together their panels, to captioning, to the format, etc. Our fourth session was dedicated exclusively to questions regarding captioning/subtitling. Moreover, in addition to offering a space to discuss panel content, the hangouts became a means for panelists from various locations across the world to meet and to exchange contact information and ideas. We later learned that several panelists from different parts of the world supported each other in the completion of their final presentations in the lead up to the conference. This sort of unanticipated collaboration suggests potentially fruitful ways that the 'hangouts' could be extended as opportunities for panelists to create horizontal networks of support.

Indeed, panelists took the initiative in various ways to create vibrant multimodal scholarship. Some panelists, anticipating that their audio-visual skills were lacking and that they would not have enough time to sharpen them, worked with filmmakers to produce their panels or presentations. Some panel organizers made sure to include visual anthropologists so they would have the collective expertise to execute their vision. A few panelists relied on their students' support in post-production. In all cases, multimodality fostered an opportunity to imagine anthropological knowledge production as a collective endeavor. To facilitate this collaborative sensibility in future iterations of this conference, we recommend creating a notice board prior to, or simultaneous with, the release of the initial CFP, to explicitly encourage these sorts of connections and opportunities to work with others.

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[6] These hangouts were hosted by E. Gabriel Dattatreyan, Arjun Shankar, and Sydney Silverstein (also on the SVA Executive Board).
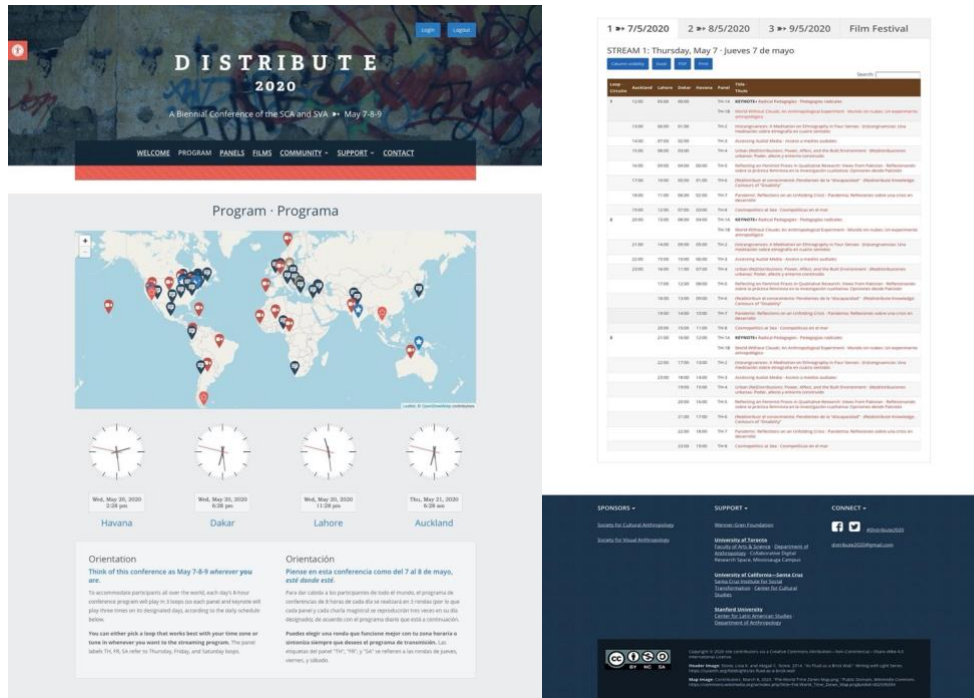
**Part VI: The Key Elements of Distribute 2020**

**1) A global schedule for a global audience**

As noted earlier, we made a commitment to internationalizing and redistributing anthropological knowledge production by turning spaces outside the North Atlantic into producers of conference content, and many of our films and panels were drawn from the Global South.

The conference map (below), from our website, features all the locations that produced panels (dark blue icon); the locations where ethnographic films were shot (red icon); and the (very few) locations where people decided to gather (usually virtually) to watch and discuss conference material (Vienna, Thessaly, Copenhagen, Berlin, Vancouver, and Toronto).
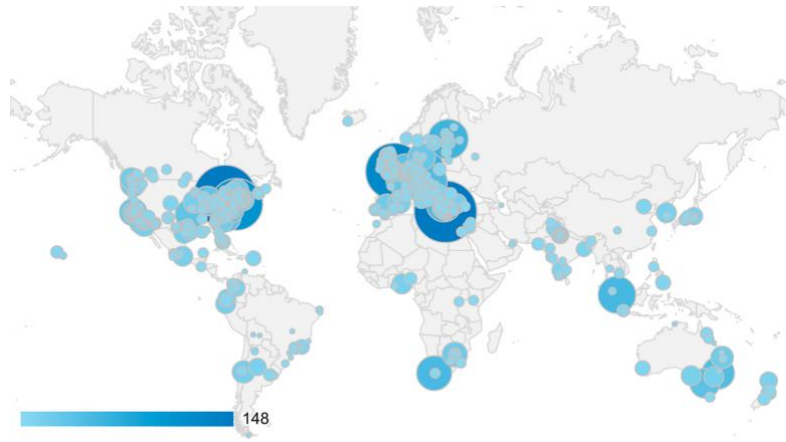


This commitment to internationalization structured the way we thought about our viewership, and therefore the conference schedule as well, and we imagined a conference that would be accessible across multiple time zones (see image below). Essentially, we programmed 8 hours of daily conference content that played three times – Loops 1, 2, and 3 – before starting the next day's program of daily content, which again played three times before beginning the final day's content, which played on three loops as well. This meant that viewers could watch a full day's content from wherever they were, during their regular daylight hours. Rather than anchored to North American time, our schedule was de-territorialized, making it possible for viewers in Delhi, for instance, to wake up at 9am Delhi time and start their conference day with 8 hours of content.
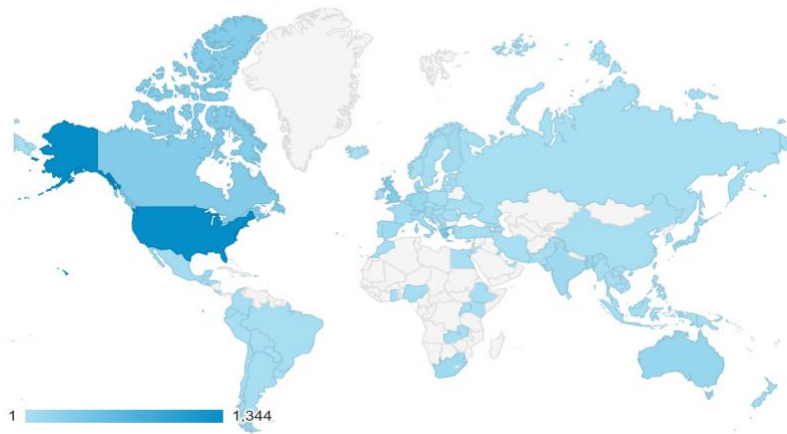
Interestingly, because panels were screened three times, some viewers took the opportunity to watch panels multiple times over the course of a day. The impact of seeing a panel multiple times became evident during post-screening Virtual Hallway discussions. Conversations between panelists and conference participants deepened throughout the day in ways that we, as organizers, had not anticipated when we came up with the idea to screen a panel three times.

Our commitment to internationalization – and its operationalizing on a technical/structure level – seemed to pay off. **Distribute had 1033 active participants from more than 300 cities in more than 70 countries** (Displacements in 2018 drew participants from about 40 countries). North American participants hailed from 42 US states and 8 Canadian provinces, and only 34% of conference participants were based in the United States.

The internationalizing of the conference's registered participants correlated with increased international visibility for the conference and its sponsoring organizations. For instance, over the May 7-14 conference week alone, the website received almost 4,000 unique visitors and over 78,500 page views from 102 countries. The top 30 countries in terms of visitors to the website (which correlates roughly with participants) were: the USA, Canada, Greece, the UK, Australia, Germany, South Africa, India, Italy, Spain, Finland, the Netherlands, Japan, Austria, Singapore, France, Mexico, Denmark, Belgium, Ecuador, New Zealand, Brazil, Turkey, Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Nigeria, South Korea, Sweden, and China.

The map above graphically represents the different cities where site visitors were located, which corresponds roughly with conference participants, giving a visual sense of where people were engaged with the conference.



The map above is of site visitors by country and is perhaps most useful for the regions almost entirely in white, i.e. where there was no engagement with the conference at all, namely: most of the Caribbean, parts of Central and South America, Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, the Gulf, and Central Asia. Language clearly matters: we had significant participation in Spanish (two panels submitted work entirely in Spanish, and we featured a number of Spanish-language films), but participation on the continent of Africa was restricted to countries with colonial ties to English (e.g. South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt). Future conference organizers may want to attend to and plan for these language/viewership patterns and lacunae.

**2) Keynotes**

Distribute 2020 had three keynotes, one per conference day: Day 1 featured "Radical Pedagogies" by Elizabeth Chin; Day 2 featured "Unsettling Imperialisms," a conversation amongst Junaid Rana, Yarimar Bonilla, and Narges Bajoghli; and Day 3 streamed a double-feature called "Making Worlds Otherwise" by Miyarrka Media and "Against Institutional Murder" by Dalit Camera. It was important to us to experiment with the keynote form: all three keynotes were imagined as conversations of some sort. However, Elizabeth Chin's conversation partner for "Radical Pedagogies" withdrew in April due to a family emergency. And the third keynote, which was to feature a video "response" by Miyarrka Media and Dalit Camera to the other's initial presentation, was only able to feature each initial presentation because of travel and health constraints created by the pandemic (organizers therefore featured them as separate keynotes, with distinct titles). Nonetheless, two of the three keynotes still ended up as collective endeavors, which aligned with the conference's spirit of collaboration.

**3) Panels**

Distribute 2020 featured a wide array of panels taking up multiple themes. In our CFP and our recruitment process, we emphasized not only multimodality and internationalism, but also explicitly political content. Our conference therefore featured work not only by anthropologists but also by activists and artists, and from a wide array of spaces outside the North Atlantic (e.g. Kurdistan, South Africa, Bosnia, Chile, Italy, Mexico, Ecuador, and the Philippines). Panels also took different forms, from a series of individual multimodal presentations stitched together to what were essentially short films. All panels were captioned or subtitled in English. Two of the panels were entirely in Spanish, with English subtitles, and one panel had the option to select Urdu captions.

Some panels (6 in all) were grouped together and streamed as two sets of three ("Epistemic Disjunctures" on Day 2 and "Materialities of Infrastructure" on Day 3), with Q&A sessions in the Virtual Hallway featuring panelists from all three panels of the set. We did this for the panels that seemed to have overlapping themes in an effort to put panelists explicitly in conversation with each other. However, we would not recommend this again, since it ended up short-changing panelists of a more focused discussion on their individual panel. Other, potentially more productive ways to put different panels directly in conversation with each other would be to have themed days or half-days, to ask panelists ahead of time to attend Virtual Hallway discussions on like-themed panels, or even to ask them to serve as moderators/discussants for a similarly themed panel.

The panels were streamed between May 7 and May 9 to registered conference participants. Between May 10 and May 14, all panels were available on-demand to registered participants. Starting on May 15, all panels except one (which contained sensitive content) became available on-demand to the general public. By making them freely accessible, we hope not only that individuals will continue to engage the conference content, but also that panels will be used in the classroom for pedagogical purposes.

**4) Film Festival**

Curated by Harjant Gill and Fiona McDonald, the festival featured 21 films from around the world (festival organizers received around 65 submissions). All films were available for on-demand viewing from May 7th to May 14th. The inclusion of a film festival component in the SCA-SVA biennial greatly enhanced the overall offerings of the conference and many attendees were as enthusiastic about watching these films as they were about watching panels.

The curation of the festival was largely an autonomous and independent undertaking by Gill and McDonald. In the future, we recommend that the film festival be more carefully and closely integrated into the conference as a whole from its inception and planning, by making festival curators part of the conference organizing team from the start. Doing so will enable two potential outcomes: 1) a closer engagement with the filmmakers, such as online (synchronous) group discussions with them, much as we did for our panelists; and 2) an opportunity to bring the films into closer conversation with the panels and build around overlapping thematic content. For instance, filmmakers could serve as moderators/discussants on panel Q&As, and vice versa. The conference as a whole might even host synchronous Q&As on similarly themed panels and films.



Two films had post-screening discussions with the film directors. These were organized by conference attendees who solicited the filmmakers and hosted Zoom meetings, after checking with the conference organizers, who then created some publicity materials and tweeted about these additional sessions from the SCA's and SVA's accounts. Each of those discussions was very well attended, and we recommend that post-screening discussions for the film festival should be an integral part of the conference.

**5) Virtual Hallway**

We used Zoom to create a Virtual Hallway for conversations and question-and-answer discussions after each panel or set of panels. Unable to rely on in-person conversations at local nodes as a result of the pandemic, the Virtual Hallway became a major feature of the conference and an important site of interactivity and community for Distribute 2020.
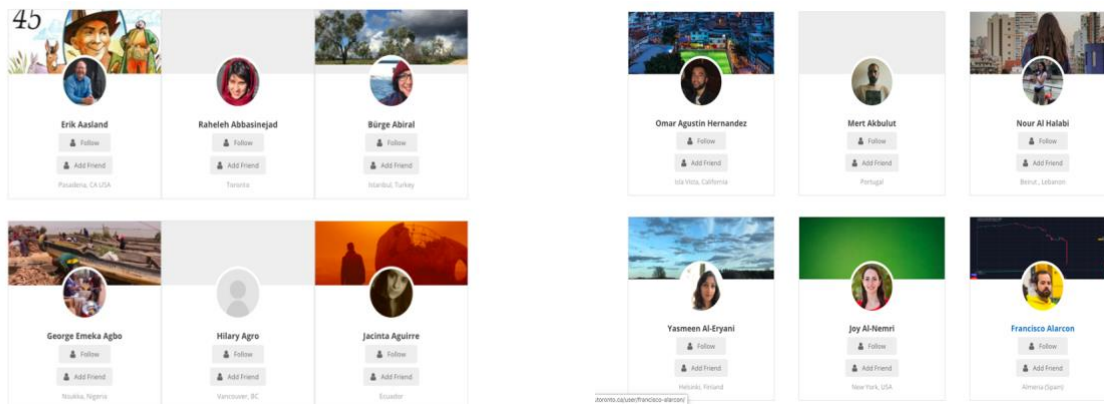
We asked panelists to have at least one representative from their panel at each of the three post-panel Q&A sessions, and all Q&A sessions except one had one or more panelists present for a discussion with conference attendees, enabling participants across various time zones to interact with and pose questions to panelists. The fact that all panels had three Q&A sessions rather than the usual one also benefited panelists, in that they not only received feedback from across the globe but were also able to reflect on an initial discussion for the second and third discussions, such that post-panel conversations built productively on previous ones. Some of our conference attendees took the opportunity not only to watch the panels multiple times but also to attend multiple discussion sessions of the same panel. Unlike one-off Q&As that usually occur at place-based conferences, multiple screenings of the same panel combined with multiple Q&A sessions for that panel created on **ongoing conversation** that deepened as it went along. Moreover, discussion sessions sometimes stretched for an hour and even longer. In some instances, when the next panel's discussion was scheduled to enter the Virtual Hallway and the previous discussion had not yet finished, panelists and participants took it upon themselves to create a new Zoom link and continue the conversation.

Another unexpected element of the Virtual Hallway was **the democratic ethos** it fostered, with junior scholars and graduate and even undergraduate students joining more senior scholars in conversations about a panel. For security reasons, we began the conference by only using the Chat function for questions: participants in the Virtual Hallway wrote out their questions and sent them to the moderator (the only person who could see them), who then read aloud incoming questions. This had the unanticipated but welcome effect of inviting questions from people who usually would not raise their hands in a crowded in-person setting, democratizing question-asking and the ensuing discussion. The fact that many people – from eminent senior scholars to undergraduate students – were in their homes created a sense of intimacy that also had a leveling effect, as did Zoom's visual interface (all participants literally took up the same amount of space as rectangles on the screen). Moreover, our accommodation of multiple time zones, with three post-panel sessions, meant that participants in time zones marginalized even by a virtual conference organized around North American time could participate in Q&A sessions. Finally, the Virtual Hallway enabled conversations amongst participants spread all over the world.

We took **security** very seriously in an effort to balance access and safety. All Virtual Hallway sessions had a moderator (either one of the conference organizers or an outside scholar) and, for security reasons, a digital bouncer (always one of the conference organizers familiar with Zoom security functions). We used three 24-hour Zoom sessions, and each session had a distinct password. Rather than emailing passwords, we posted them on the Stream page, which was accessible only to registered participants. Our security efforts paid off: we managed to keep the Virtual Hallway open for 72 hours without a single act of trolling or Zoom-bombing. Indeed, by Day 3 of the conference, once we had a sense of our participants and our security concerns had been alleviated, we sometimes left the Chat function in Zoom open and visible to all participants in the Virtual Hallway, and a stream of questions and commentary ran parallel to the live conversation; this could be tried out by future conference organizers, though organizers would need to have established both security protocols and a good sense of the participating public.

## 6) La Plaza

The goal of this interactive forum (via the WordPress plug-in Ultimate Member) was to create community before the conference and allow for registered participants to start topical conversations. We initially chose this forum not because we wanted to recreate other social media outlets – we largely relied on Twitter for that – but because we wanted to provide an asynchronous baseline that all participants would have access to regardless of whether or not they use a particular platform. The design was to be inclusive by default in that it did not require platforms other than the website. All conference attendees were required to create a profile in La Plaza in order to access the conference; we also created dedicated pages for all panels, keynotes, and films.



We paid for a plug-in to guarantee data privacy, which served double duty to automate our registration system, unlike in 2018. But the plug-in also had positive privacy implications: users opted in and could delete their data, and site admins rather than an outside company had control over deleting content (fortunately, we did not have to delete any offensive content). The plug-in also made sure that content created by conference participants would not be monetized by a third party.

Unfortunately, La Plaza was probably the least successful feature of Distribute 2020 in the sense that it was not as heavily trafficked during the conference as we had hoped it would be. It is possible that this

forum did not work as a space of interaction because we asked users to adopt something new, or because the Virtual Hallway successfully fulfilled real time communicative needs by creating a space for personal interaction. At the same time, although it is hard to gauge with the existing data, it is possible that La Plaza played a part in creating a sense of belonging and intimacy that translated into vibrant interactions in the Virtual Hallway, since it required conference attendees to take the time to create a conference profile and encouraged attendees to look at the profiles of other attendees as well as panels' and films' dedicated pages. An asynchronous communal space like La Plaza is thus something to consider in future iterations of the conference.

Twitter also functioned as a constant real-time commentary on the conference. Registered participants who were logged into the website could post on Twitter directly from the conference's Stream page, so they could comment on panels in real time. We also embedded the hashtag (#distribute2020) feed in the Stream page, so users without Twitter accounts could follow along if desired. The SCA Contributing Editors team of graduate students played a big part in making sure there were live tweets for many of the panels, which contributed greatly to a public conversation about the conference. Going forward, other platforms (e.g. Slack, or the comment feature on UStream) that enable participants to comment in real time might be worth developing/enacting.

**7) Nodes**

Unlike Displacements in 2018, which crucially hinged on local viewing nodes, the pandemic made physical nodes impossible in most places. In some instances, nodes gathered virtually, as was the case in Greece, where Distribute 2020 became the occasion for an underfunded and depleted Greek anthropology to gather together and reinvigorate conversations across different Greek institutions. Their node even featured a virtual dinner party and music. Other nodes, notably in Berlin, Vienna, Vancouver (UBC), the New School, Copenhagen, and Columbia University, also met virtually. In one instance, participants were able to meet physically: one of our panelists, Dr. Chidi Ugwu, gathered a group of his students in a classroom at the University of Nigeria (Nsukka), to watch parts of the conference.

**8) Coffee With …**

Coffee With … enabled emerging scholars to sign up to meet with more established scholars and university press editors. It was modeled on place-based conferences like the AAA annual meetings, which are some of the rare spaces where junior scholars can meet and network with more senior scholars and/or present their work to presses. We organized 12 Coffee With … sessions, mostly featuring SCA and SVA board members (with groups of up to 15 people in a Zoom conversation), as well as four press editors (Duke, Princeton, the Atelier Series of the University of California Press, and Goldsmiths/MIT Press).

We created Coffee With … as a way to democratize access to anthropological knowledge and generate more opportunities for virtual interaction now that in-person local nodes were largely impossible. The lesson we learned from this interactive feature was that emerging scholars not only appreciated meeting more established scholars, but even more so enjoyed meeting each other. We recommend that the facilitation of these virtual meeting spaces be greatly expanded in future iterations of the conference and

include not just meet-ups with presses and senior scholars, but also meetings among specific interest groups, including minoritized constituencies in anthropology.
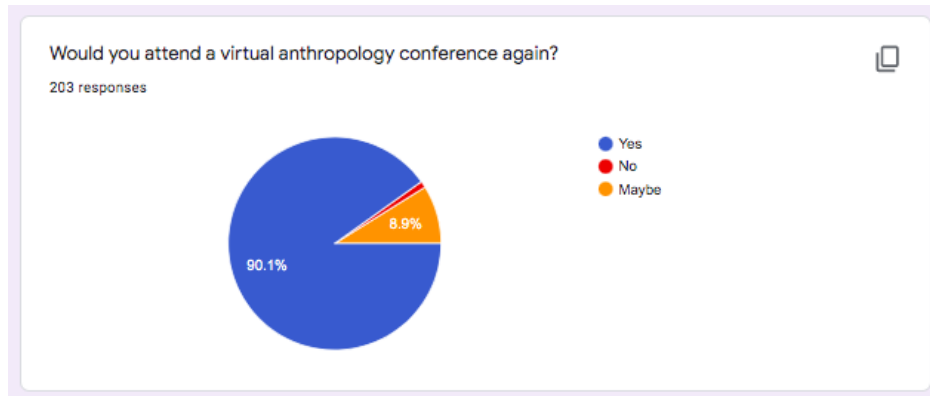
## Summary

Other than La Plaza, all the various features of Distribute 2020 were demonstrably successful, and we encourage future conference organizers to use and build on that basic structure: pre-recorded multimodal panels and keynotes streamed on a single channel and on a global schedule; a week-long film festival with films available on-demand; and various synchronous interactive features like a Virtual Hallway and Coffee With. Some survey results – from a questionnaire sent to participants a week after the conference ended – may be useful at this point.
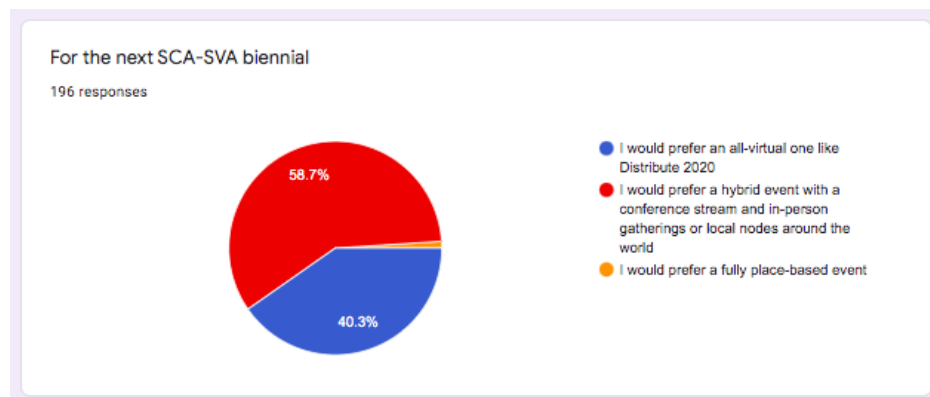
The graph below, which tabulates the conference activities and features respondents most enjoyed, is interesting in that it emphasizes our earlier mention of the importance of accommodating an international public. Almost 70% of respondents mentioned as a key feature the global schedule, with each panel streaming 3 times every eight hours. Just over 50% also mentioned the Virtual Hallway as enjoyable, highlighting the need for spaces of community in any virtual conferencing model.

Please indicate the conference activities and features you most enjoyed or found most useful

198 responses

| Feature | Responses |
| --- | --- |
| Panels | 162 (81.8%) |
| La Plaza | 35 (17.7%) |
| Virtual Hallway | 97 (49%) |
| Film Festival | 97 (49%) |
| Coffee With . . . | 27 (13.6%) |
| Participant Directory | 29 (14.6%) |
| The global schedule (i.e. all panels st… | 134 (67.7%) |

Significantly, as the graph below shows, an overwhelming majority of respondents (90.1%) would attend a virtual anthropology conference again.

**Would you attend a virtual anthropology conference again?**

203 responses

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

90.1%

8.9%

However, as the next graph (below) demonstrates, many of those respondents (58.7%) would prefer **a hybrid event** rather than an all-virtual conference, i.e. a conference with a combination of virtual streaming panels and in-person gatherings or local nodes. In their comments, respondents expanded on this question, noting the value and conviviality of in-person interactions and the creative energy and sense of community that produces. That said, as the graph below indicates, 40.3% of respondents would prefer an all-virtual conference like Distribute 2020.



**For the next SCA-SVA biennial**

196 responses

- I would prefer an all-virtual one like Distribute 2020
- I would prefer a hybrid event with a conference stream and in-person gatherings or local nodes around the world
- I would prefer a fully place-based event

58.7%

40.3%

## Part VII: Conference Goals and Outcomes
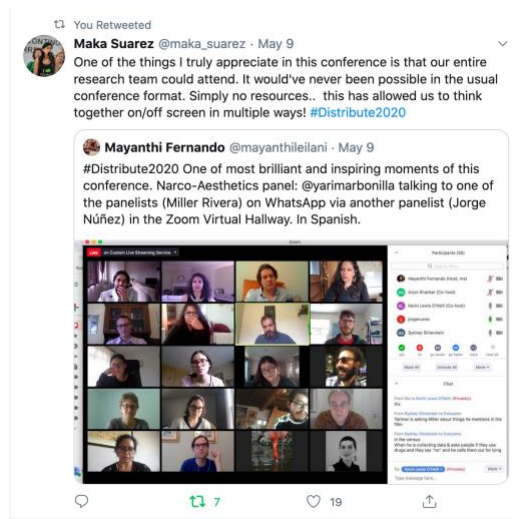
### 1) Democratization of access

It is worth underscoring at the outset that virtual conferencing makes it possible for a much wider demographic to attend than does a place-based conference, bypassing political borders that prevent many scholars from sharing work in person. As Sinjini Mukherjee, a participant from Delhi, noted: "this is a model which really circumvents oppressive visa regimes that we, academics from the global south, have to contend with whenever we want to attend a big conference in the Global North."[7] Moreover, while virtual conferencing does require access to some basic technical infrastructure (high-speed internet and a

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[7] From our "Morning After" conversation on Sunday, May 10th, when conference organizers came together for a wrap-up conversation.
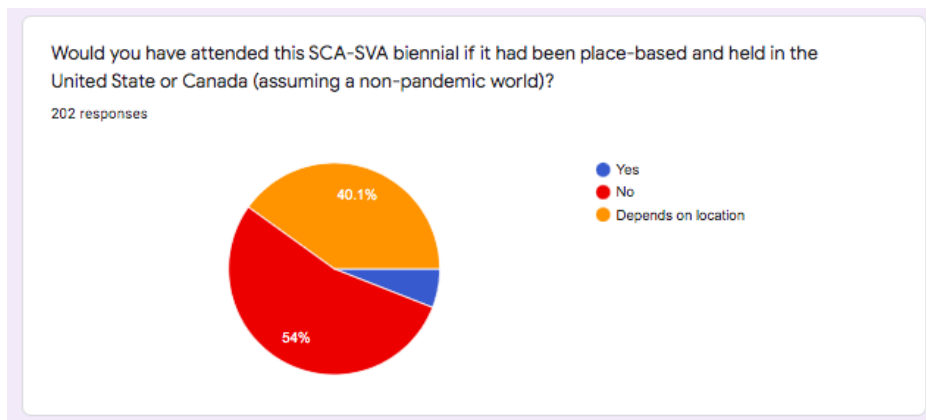
computer or smart phone) and familiarity with platforms like Zoom and a web-stream, it essentially eliminates travel costs associated with place-based conferencing, massively democratizing access, including to those who have childcare or other family responsibilities that would limit travel to a place-based conference and/or to those who have mobility restrictions that preclude travel.

The tweet below from Maka Suarez, an anthropologist based in Cuenca, Ecuador and the organizer of a panel on disability (with panelists from Ecuador and Mexico), is illustrative of the democratizing potential of this conference model. As she writes, "One of the things I truly appreciate in this conference is that our entire research team [from Ecuador and Mexico] could attend. It would've never been possible in the usual conference format. Simply no resources. [T]his has allowed us to think together on/off screen in multiple ways!"



Survey results from a questionnaire sent to participants underscore the way that Distribute democratized access. The graph below shows that more than half of the survey's respondents (54%) would have never attended Distribute 2020 had it been a place-based conference held in North America.

The vast majority of respondents (87.8%) who would not have attended a place-based conference list finances as the reason why; other significant reasons include lack of time/teaching obligations (59%); the desire to reduce their carbon footprint (48.9%); political barriers such as visas and travel restrictions (18.1%); childcare obligations (13.8%); and physical limitations and ableist infrastructures (8%).

Beyond the broad paradigm of virtual multimodal conferencing, and drawing together some previously discussed elements of the report, we discuss below how various constituent elements of Distribute 2020 made it possible to achieve our conference goal of democratizing access to anthropological knowledge, where those goals fell short, and how future iterations of the conference might better achieve them.

**Infrastructure:** The basic infrastructure of the conference – which featured one conference stream rather than multiple streams – was a democratic leveler: panels by graduate students and/or non-Euro-American panelists were featured just as prominently as panels comprised of senior scholars and/or Euro-American academics, and no-one had to choose between attending a panel of "VIPs" and attending a panel by lesser-known scholars, as is often the case at place-based conferences or virtual conferences with multiple simultaneous streams. Rather, every panel was given multiple dedicated times and discussion sessions, and audiences were required to take seriously every presentation, whether it was by a senior scholar or a graduate student. As discussed earlier, various other features also democratized access: the Virtual Hallway functioned as a democratic leveler of sorts, disabling common hierarchies and enabling conversations across different segments of academe; and Coffee With explicitly engaged and created space for junior scholars.

**Multimodal panels:** The multimodal model of Distribute 2020 offers the potential not only to bypass political borders but also disrupt colonial hierarchies of knowledge, both in terms of who speaks and the location from where they speak. Moreover, multimodality interpellates a younger generation of scholars often more familiar with the relevant technology: many of our panels were produced by graduate students, and many were collaborations amongst junior and senior scholars (especially when the latter were less technically versed). Finally, though just as importantly, pre-recorded presentations enable captioning and subtitling of all content, making them accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing communities. Indeed, in our call for panels, we asked potential panelists not only to experiment with both form and content but also to discuss how they might use multimodality as an opportunity for expanding access. We encouraged them to take seriously "the social model of disability"[8] and therefore to think about the relation between the technological infrastructures they were using and how to allow the widest number of people with varied abilities to participate. After this initial CFP, we continued to work with them on making multimodal panels that were equitably accessible, focusing on questions of pacing, captioning, audio description, and the like.

Our expansive [Accessibility statement](#) goes into detail on this and other ways we tried to use virtual multimodal conferencing as an opportunity to expand accessibility, even as we recognized that fully equitable access is a work-in-progress. Future conference organizers might want to think, for instance, about ASL interpretation and/or real-time captioning for the Virtual Hallway. Future organizers may also want to have more robust discussions about how to better integrate questions of aural and visual access into the conceptualization of the conference, and of various panels. This might include having a disability

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[8] Tyler Zoanni, "[Creating an Accessible Online Presentation](#)," written for Displacements in 2018.

studies expert as one of the conference organizers, or as a consulting advisor from the inception to the production of the conference.

**Language accessibility:** our fully bilingual website (in English and Spanish) enabled us to reach Spanish-speaking constituencies; perhaps as a result, we received and accepted multiple panel submissions in Spanish. We believe the bilingual website also signaled our openness not just to Spanish-speakers but also to participants beyond the North Atlantic, and we received another panel submission largely in Italian and French. Yet another panel from Pakistan had an option to select Urdu captions. Our participants also came from well beyond the conventional constituencies of North Atlantic anthropology, with a geographic spread that spanned 70 countries.

Nonetheless, English was still the dominant language of Distribute 2020, in panels and films and in conversations in the Virtual Hallway and Coffee With sessions. We recommend that future conference organizers explore ways to pluralize language use and translation across languages. With pre-recorded content, these options become, from a purely technical perspective, relatively straightforward, but they do require a budget to pay for technology and labor to create and verify captions in multiple languages. With regard to synchronous discussions in a Virtual Hallway, translations are more challenging but not insurmountable. Given that participants at Distribute 2020 were more than willing to serve as translators when the need arose in Virtual Hallway discussions, we imagine that future conference organizers might explicitly draw on this constituency, either ad hoc (as we did) or in a more systematic and planned way. Zoom's Webinar platform also has capabilities for synchronous translation by bilingual interpreters, though again, cost would have to be factored in to hire professional interpreters.

A few of the technologies used – for instance our conference registration system – required access to Latin alphabet inputs; language assumptions also became an issue when handing out complex passwords using special characters such as \$, %, and >, which may not appear on all keyboards. At the same time, conference participants were able to contribute asynchronous content in multiple languages. For instance, commenters posted not only in the conference languages of English and Spanish but also in German and (transliterated) Hindi in La Plaza, and the aforementioned Greek node posted information about its activities in Greek using the Greek alphabet. Relying on widely available web technologies may therefore facilitate multilingual conversation that moves beyond simply translating the conference materials and delivered content. Future organizers might think even more creatively about the conference website as a platform to encourage additional forms of multi-linguistic access and participation.

**Cost:** After some initial conversations about increasing registration fees to \$20 for Distribute 2020, we decided to keep registration at \$10 for "anyone and everyone" and to offer higher-paying options for those who could do so. This made it possible for a wide demographic to attend (contingent faculty, graduate students, undergraduate students, retired and unemployed people, and non-anthropologist activists, artists, and educators). Indeed, graduate students were a significant component of Distribute 2020, not only as creators of panels but also as participants in the conference, and a post-conference survey suggests that more than 40% of participants were graduate students. Moreover, the nominal registration fee played a significant role in internationalizing our audience, making the conference more accessible to scholars in the Global South. We also noted explicitly on the website that we would waive registration fees for those who needed that for financial reasons, and a few participants used this option.

**2) Internationalization and redistribution of knowledge production**

There were two rationales for this virtual biennial: the ecological benefits of a nearly-carbon-neutral conference and the redistribution/internationalization of anthropological knowledge production. What has become clear is that those two goals are intertwined: a nearly-carbon-neutral conference via a central virtual access point creates the conditions of possibility for internationalization and democratization. And the internationalization that comes with this conference model allows for us to prefigure the kind of anthropology we would hope for: accessible, distributed, and firmly committed to engaging scholars from all over the world.

Like many fields, anthropology remains largely tethered to an epistemological model in which the North Atlantic produces theory and spaces outside the North Atlantic serve as sites of empirical data gathering and/or receivers of anthropological knowledge. Distribute 2020 deliberately eschewed that colonial model of center and peripheries, promoting knowledge as a rhizomatic network of exchange. As noted earlier, we committed significant time and financial resources ($7500) to recruiting panels and keynotes from the non-North-Atlantic, in an explicit attempt to redistribute the production of anthropological knowledge. Those panels and keynotes – from Chile, Mexico & Ecuador, Beirut, Italy, Nigeria, South Africa, Greece, India, Pakistan, and Aboriginal Australia – were integral components of the conference, and a number of them explicitly took up the matters of epistemic hegemonies and North-South asymmetries in knowledge production. For instance, Dr. Chidi Ugwu, in a panel featuring Nigerian anthropologists at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, directly addressed this issue, noting in his presentation: "Today I see myself as the written becoming the writer" (see tweet below). It is precisely these kinds of reversals in the production of knowledge that Distribute 2020 hoped to generate, and that a virtual or hybrid multimodal conference model can enable.



We also recognize the imperative to internationalize and democratize the conference organization itself: although three of the five organizers of Distribute 2020 are people of color, four organizers are located in

North American institutions, and the fifth is based in London. All organizers received or will receive their PhDs from elite private U.S. institutions (the University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, and Stanford University). This is partly a result of the fact that the conference organizers are drawn from the executive boards of the SCA and SVA, which are comprised largely of North America-based scholars. Even as we realize the benefits of having organizers drawn from well-resourced North American institutions with advanced technological capabilities, we strongly encourage the organizers of future biennials – and any virtual multimodal conference – to attend to redistributing the very organization of the conference itself, for instance, by partnering with individuals, institutions, or professional associations in the Global South.

**3) Collaboration**

As we noted earlier, Distribute 2020 was a deeply collaborative process in multiple ways. First, asking for entire panels rather than individual presentations meant that panels were created collaboratively, and panelists often shared technical insights and know-how with fellow panelists as they put their panels together. Conference organizers also consistently worked with panelists, especially those not previously experienced in creating multimodal panels. We provided lively how-to-videos (still available on the conference website) and offered four virtual tech hangouts. Before the conference began, we also met virtually with panelists to walk them through the Virtual Hallway and La Plaza, and we were responsive to their various needs (including deadline extensions and captioning) as the pandemic hit.

Second, despite the fact that the SCA is a bigger and better-resourced section than the SVA, we saw this biennial as a total collaboration between the SCA and SVA, and we were committed to fully sharing labor and responsibilities. All decisions were made collectively, a sometime arduous and inefficient model, but one that was important to us to adhere to as a matter of principle. We believe that that principle is a fundamental element of the two other conference goals of democratization and internationalization, mentioned previously, and we strongly encourage future biennial organizers to take this principle of collaboration seriously at an operational level.

Finally, we relied on our conference public as well. As mentioned earlier, a few of the Virtual Hallway sessions were bilingual, and participants often served as translators, simultaneously translating (either verbally or in the Chat window) between Spanish and English. In other moments, panelists who wanted to continue a conversation but were being ushered out because a new panel discussion was about to begin used their own Zoom accounts to create parallel mini-hallways to keep a conversation going. Moreover, two panelists took it upon themselves to organize a virtual discussion about one of the films in the Film Festival. That participants and panelists felt empowered in these ways underscores the spirit of collaboration that was a consistent feature of the conference as a whole.
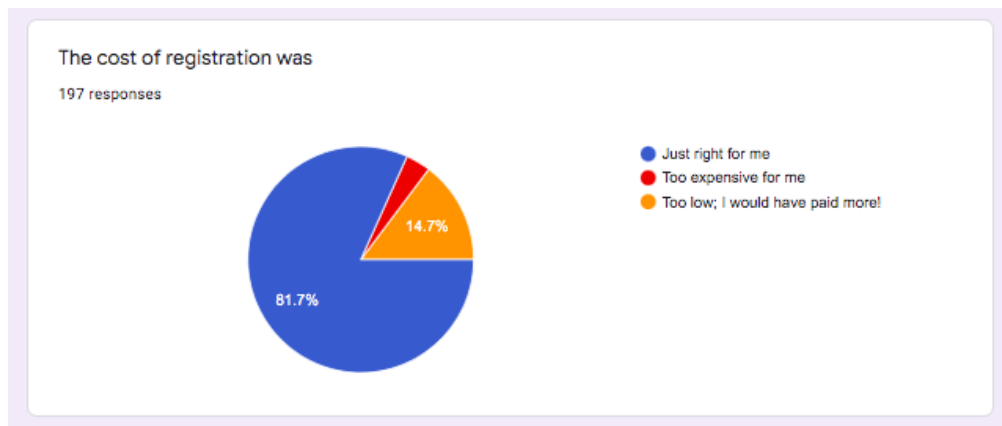
**Part VIII: Budget and Financial Feasibility of Virtual Multimodal Conferencing[9]**

Our fiscal model relied on very low registration fees ($10) for the majority of individual participants, with options to pay more for individuals ($50 and $100) and institutions ($100 for under-resourced institutions

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[9] Conference organizers would be happy to provide more details about breakdowns of costs and revenue. Email mfernan3@ucsc.edu.

and $200 for well-resourced institutions). The graph below, with an overwhelming majority of respondents finding registration costs "just right," demonstrates that registration costs were calibrated correctly. Nonetheless, what that graph also suggests is that future organizers might want to consider adding a $20 or $25 option, and to make the sliding scale – and the ability to "pay it forward" by subsidizing the "anyone and everyone" rate – a more explicit and publicized ethic of the conference.



**The revenue generated from registration was $12,890.**[10] In terms of breakdown across the sliding scale, $6730 came from 673 individuals paying $10; $2900 came from 58 individuals paying $50; and $1700 came from 17 individuals paying $100 specifically to "pay-it-forward" to the next iteration of the biennial. An additional $1000 came from 5 well-resourced virtual nodes (with 5-25 participants each). In other words, only about half our revenue (52.2%) was generated by individuals paying $10; 36% was generated by individuals paying-it-forward, i.e. actively subsidizing other registrants; and 7.7% came from five well-resourced institutions with virtual nodes. We made $430 from individuals paying $5 as part of a node or classroom group (3% of registration revenue), though we discontinued that rate a few days before the conference began; and $100 came from an under-resourced institutional node. What this suggests is that a small minority of individual registrants (in this case 75 individuals, or 8% of registrants), coupled with institutional registrations by a few well-resourced institutions, can enable this kind of conference to keep its registration costs for the vast majority of participants very low.

We also generated another **$20,484 from grants and institutional funds**. Of that, $7500 was earmarked specifically for panels and keynotes from the Global South; we used other institutional funds for captioning, how-to videos, and other modes of expanding access, as well as to pay for technical personnel and infrastructure. About $10,000 of those institutional funds came from the University of Toronto. Another $1500 came from Stanford, and $1000 came from UC Santa Cruz.

**The conference cost $26,806,** of which about $11,500 went toward technical infrastructure and technical personnel (including Paul Christians, our Tech Advisor). On the whole, we do not anticipate that future iterations of the conference will generate additional tech infrastructure or personnel costs beyond the $11-12,000 used for this conference. These are also the only costs that we do not foresee being funded for

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[10] As noted earlier, these figures are from the registration figures provided by the AAA.

future iterations of this biennial by grants from educations institutions, although that is not impossible if a sponsoring institution is invested in carbon-neutral conferencing but does not have the technical infrastructure itself. It's worth noting that registration ($12,890) covered these technical infrastructure costs.

**All in all, we had a budget surplus of $6,569**. We believe this means that Distribute 2020 provides a sustainable financial model for the future, with the following existing components and possible tweaks:

- Grant aid from a foundation (like Wenner-Gren) to fund or subsidize the production of panels and any other conference content from the Global South.
- Minimal contributions from three or four educational institutions ($1000-$3500). It is worth noting that the University of Toronto provided around $10,000 in conference support, which is unlikely to happen again. At the same time, we also had a surplus of $6569. In other words, even if Toronto had only contributed $3500 instead of $10,000, the conference would still have broken even.
- A sliding registration fee scale so as to keep the base rate at $10, but subsidizing that through a small minority of individuals paying higher-bracket registration fees (and this might be increased by directly addressing and better publicizing the ethics of this "pay-it-forward" model). Future organizers might also consider adding a $20 or $25 individual option, given that a substantial minority of survey respondents (14.7%) thought the conference cost too little (though this may have the unintended effect of decreasing the number of $50 contributions).
- Tweaking the registration fee structure at the institutional level, especially if nodes can be in-person, to maximize contributions by well-resourced institutions that organize such nodes. For example, conference organizers could again distinguish between under-resourced and well-resourced institutions but have a higher fee for well-resourced institutions, or assign a set number of "passes" (e.g. 30 passes for a $250 institutional registration; 50 passes for a $400 registration; and unlimited passes for $500 or $600 registration).
- With these various tweaks (and others, for instance, figuring out a way to monetize press presence), a model might be found to use registration revenue to subsidize panels from the Global South, rather than relying solely on foundation aid.

In conclusion, then, Distribute 2020 was a hugely successful conference, offering a financially viable model for virtual or hybrid multimodal conferencing that encompasses excellent panels and films, nearly-carbon-neutral conferencing, equitable and democratic access for a wide array of participants, and the internationalization and redistribution of anthropological knowledge production.