

California State University, Monterey Bay



Oral History Interviews

Digital Proximities
Covid19 and the transformation of pedagogical practices

Staring At It For So Long

Interview with
Aislinn McMahon
Recorded on May 3, 2020

Interviewer: Natalie Davis

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Digital Proximities **011 McMahon**

Aislinn McMahon

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1 **00:00** [Music]

2 **00:08 Davis** *Well, thank you so much, Aisling, for joining me and I'll let you introduce*
3 *yourself. Tell us about where you go to school and how Covid has affected and impacted your*
4 *life and education.*

5 **00:24 McMahon** Okay, all right I guess. My name is Aislinn McMahon, I live in Woodland,
6 California. I go to UC Davis. I'm studying Molecular Anthropology, so it's my first year in
7 graduate school at the University.

8 **00:41 Davis** *You said you were going into your first quarter when this happened.*

9 **00:49 McMahon** Yeah, this is my first year in grad school, so this is my third quarter, and
10 luckily, because we're on the quarter system. Covid didn't affect like the middle of term, I guess.
11 It was just started, as we're transitioning, so it started at the end of winter quarter, which kind of
12 affected finals. For a lot of people it was like the finals week, when it shifted to online. So, either
13 they, the professors, transitioned there their finals to an online format, or they just canceled the
14 final, and they adjusted the percentages; which was a little crazy for some courses

15 **00:47 Davis** *Extremely, yeah.*

16 **01:42 McMahon** I hit either I'm really hopeful this so you didn't have to take a final or you
17 no longer had like that extra assignment to help boost your grade. You're just like: "oh that's it!"

18 **01:52 Davis** *So, did it affect your grades at all or were you are you okay?*

19 **01:57 McMahon** I was okay, but I also I have a job, a teaching assistant job on campus. I
20 saw my first job. I guess started last quarter. Let me think... and yeah, so, I'm trying to
21 remember if the final was transitioned to an online format, but it didn't really affect me, because I
22 have to grade online anyway. I read their, well yeah, I was reading their online submissions for
23 their finals.

24 **02:34 Davis** *Okay, so like the undergrads.*

25 **02:38 McMahon** Yeah, I was an undergrad course, and I can do it remotely, so, yeah, made
26 it a little bit easier, but still be zero, yeah, but for them it was probably chaotic, with everything
27 going on and also having to take a final.

28 **02:53 Davis** *Yeah, definitely. So, how about the semester? How has work worked out
29 this quarter?*

30 **03:00 McMahon** I also have a teaching assistant job and it's a little, it's a little different,
31 because it's a very large class size. Whereas before it was a smaller class size, but I was also, I
32 wasn't just grading, I was also delivering, you know, course material through like Zoom
33 [sessions] but that would stress me off, because I'm already, I was already so nervous teaching in
34 front of them. So, this this quarter it's a larger class, but I only have to grade the assignments, so
35 I don't have to actually teach. It actually worked out pretty well for me, I guess. The only thing is
36 that I'm also taking full-time units in grad school. So, full-time course courses which are also
37 being delivered via Zoom and it's not like just, you know, go through these slides this week. It's
38 still pretty structured, which is really helpful. The professors teach class at the scheduled time,
39 when class would have been in person. It helps keep a routine, which is really nice, but it
40 definitely adds to just the amount of stuff I have to do, like attend the lectures, also attend my TA
41 lectures, and then grade for a class of 105 [students]. Yeah, it's an upper division Sociology

42 course, out of my discipline, but still really did. But as far as me, personally, it's not affecting me
43 as much as the other Anthropology graduate students, because I'm in a very small lab of
44 geneticists, and the other anthropologists are archaeologists, so it's affecting them a lot more than
45 me. Because they're used to being in a physical lab. My lab is... I mean, I was in a wet lab, but
46 my lab is computational, so it's all on the computer and just logging into the computing cluster
47 through UC Davis. So, I can do everything remotely. It's pretty nice, but having to [as] I
48 constantly [do] look at your laptop is...

49 **05:48 Davis** *Exhausting!*

50 **05:49 McMahon** I think that's what's getting to be the most, yes, exhausting. And I just can't
51 focus. It's just you, you're staring at it for so long, that you can't really focus anymore, and you
52 just kind of get sidetracked. Also, working at home, having a cat... I'll just go play with... I'll
53 just go play with you and I won't have to do my work.

54 **06:12 Davis** *Oh, procrastination, yeah, that's really hard, but it sounds like it's at least,*
55 *for your learning, it's not quite as challenging going for tool, compared. They're grad students*
56 *that's good right?*

57 **06:27 McMahon** Yeah, in that respect, I think I'm kind of lucky, but it's not affecting me as
58 much.

59 **06:35 Davis** *Yeah, that's nice but still, you have a lot of things going on that are*
60 *constantly virtual. You haven't been back on campus at all right?*

61 **06:46 McMahon** No, yeah that's [right]. I mean, we can go, but our lab space is very
62 limited. I just have it because I don't really a need. The only thing that's really a kind of affected
63 is [that] I was getting a lot of wet lab hours learning how to do a couple things in there from

64 another graduate student. We're working with DNA samples, so it's been really fun. But it's kind
65 of on hold, I know but I'm gaining other skills, so it's okay.

66 **07:21 Davis** *[Stay] positive, but yeah, the labs [closing] that's a bummer. I was in our*
67 *archeology lab and I had already fulfilled most of the hours -luckily- but we were going over*
68 *photographing and cataloging, and we were going to get more specific into that, and doing*
69 *different apertures and the different ways to photograph it, so it you can actually put it in*
70 *archives and collections. Obviously, I can't do that anymore, so that's a bummer. But, like you*
71 *said, we're learning new skills such as zoom...*

72 **07:56 McMahon** Yeah, and hopefully when this, you know, is over, now that I'm really
73 digging deep into my computational skills, I can go back in the wet lab, and do some more work
74 there.

75 **08:05 Davis** *How many more semesters... but you're not semester. How many more*
76 *quarters do I hope you like...*

77 **08:16 McMahon** I know! Transitioning from semester to quarter is not only like difficult to
78 just keep track of, but just the amount of work. And like just packed into the corner, is crazy, but
79 it is only a two-year program, so I'll be done next June. Yes, only a year left, so kind of scary,
80 you know, the talk about like if this gets pushed even till the Fall Quarter, it's kind of sad,
81 because I only have so much time here.

82 **08:49 Davis** *Yeah and if that gets pushed to the fall quarter, are you going to be able to*
83 *get all the classes that you need to graduate?*

84 **08:57 McMahon** Um, that's a good question. I think so, because a lot of my coursework
85 is... let me think... I think one of them is a lab that I would have to do. So I'm not sure about
86 that. I'm not even sure how they would conduct that over Zoom. I don't know what's the like

87 yeah For my master's program, there's actually not a lot of units required: it's only 36 units,
88 which, because it's a quarter system, I think I've already fulfilled. Yes, because I've been 12...
89 let's see my count... well 25... yeah 36. But then, it's like you also have to add in research time
90 and so it equals about two years. But it's really, it doesn't really take that long I guess.

91 **09:57 Davis** *That's still exciting, though, that you'll be done in a year. Do you plan on*
92 *going anywhere, providing the Covid doesn't mess this up. Do you plan on like going to maybe*
93 *say like the body farm or anything like that, to further your knowledge.*

94 **10:14 Davis** That would be really cool! Right now, with what I'm learning, [I am]
95 hoping that I get back into the wet lab to get some more experience, I'll be kind of on track. Let's
96 see. Where do I want to go? My PI was actually giving me some suggestions. Let me find it on
97 this email... Yes. So, she was looking some stuff up for me, if I do so after I graduate. I'll have
98 enough experience to basically get this trainee license. I'll have my masters and then an
99 additional trainee license for a Clinical Genetic Scientist job, but I would need to log. I would
100 basically be like an intern, and I would need 40 weeks working there. The program that runs is
101 like, a lot of hospitals throughout California -it's a strictly California program- any, almost any
102 hospital in California has this program; which is kind of not scary, but you know, considering
103 [that] if it continues, then that's not, I mean, kind of a hot spot for like you know what I mean...

104 **11:47 Davis** *That's kind of, that's interesting, so you would be working with like the*
105 *victims of [Covid] I mean...*

106 **11:55 McMahon** I guess yes. I mean, to put it out, yes. So, that's kind of where I'm headed. I
107 guess, just because I'm getting a lot of -I say hopefully more- wet lab work. But a lot of
108 computational work, genetic work, I guess right now. My research? I'm just starting it. It's been
109 like pushed off a bit. We're studying genes related to height. We're looking specifically at

110 stressors associated with -I don't want to say decreased height, but like it affecting your marrow
111 bone development in childhood.

112 **12:42 Davis** *Like bone density molded your stature.*

113 **12:48 McMahon** Yes. It'll be pretty fun. We haven't quite started it, yet we're waiting on the
114 data. We are getting data from a UK biobank. It's like -I don't even know- five hundred thousand
115 individuals. We have to filter through [what] we want to be working with, like that many, but
116 that's a big project. I mean working with that, it won't really have much to do with what I'll do
117 after, but the skills that I will be using to work with the data I can use. a sales lawyer I guess is
118 fencing

119 **13:22 Davis** *How is [Covid] affecting your social life, and how is that taking a toll on
120 you, personally? Say, school is a big part of [your] social life.*

121 **13:45 McMahon** Yes. I mean, with my lab, we have meetings every week, so that's
122 obviously just transitioned to zoom, and my PI, she knows that this is like, I guess, some of our
123 lab mates aren't, we're not antisocial, but I don't know how to say it... awkward, like grad school
124 students are. I don't know if there's like a typical, but she knows that we need that kind of
125 interaction. Even if it's just over zoom. So she tries to initiate meetings, not just our lab meeting
126 where we are like actually talking about works, but more like a fun coffee hour or just off I'll get
127 on and talk like cooking dinner together and just chat. Because some of my other lab mates they
128 don't have roommates, so they are literally all by themselves. But I think that's been really nice.
129 Other than that, I don't know. I think, right now, I'm more coming to terms with it but in the
130 beginning it was just, it kind of gives you anxiety, knowing that you can't go anywhere; like
131 you're in your house, and there's only so long you can be in your apartment before you're feeling

132 trapped and you're like you need to get out; like having cabin fever. So, like my well-being, I
133 don't know.

134 **15:20 Davis** *But you're adjusting as best you can, and we're all, so it's just like this*
135 *awkward just trying to figure out how to switch everything over and still maintain normalcy,*
136 *some sense of it. Yes, that's another hard aspect of working from home and to school from home,*
137 *and everything being at home is like everything!*

138 **15:46 McMahon** Like in one spy I feel like it's hard. Lately, well I'm also with moving but
139 lately it's been hard to get a good night's sleep. I don't know if it is because working in the same
140 area literally doing everything and, you know, you can't shut your brain off, but it is nice having
141 a patio to escape, just pretend I'm somewhere else, or taking a walk, you know. We can still walk
142 to the park, so just little escapes. That is much-needed.

143 **16:22 Davis** *Yes, I agree. I've taken Jenna [my dog] to the park a few times and geared*
144 *up, and worn my mask, and everything, just to take precaution. And it's been nice, but it gets*
145 *yes... it's like cabin fever. You just start going crazy and like "oh I'm seeing things," "the walls*
146 *are talking to me..."*

147 **16:42 McMahon** Yes, and then, there's just some days where you're just super motivated
148 and you're like "okay, I'm gonna do this," "I'm gonna get this done," and you get all this stuff
149 done. And then, there's some days where it's just like you really don't want to do anything. You
150 should want to be like a couch potato, yes. So, it's, it's just crazy. Like the complete switch it's
151 like one or the other but...

152 **17:04 Davis** *I'm glad I'm not the only one who's isn't about. Because I'm like some days*
153 *I'm productive and now that I'm feeling a little bit better, like semi productive. Yesterday*
154 *productive, today, I'm have a feeling I'm just going to want to binge watch Netflix tomorrow.*

155 **17:21 McMahon** Yes, I mean, it's like you're balancing, you're like I'm getting it done just
156 you know all in one, either crammed into one day, or you know...

157 **17:32 Davis** *You're just doing the best you can. I know I'm behind on a lot of stuff, so I*
158 *feel kind of anxious, because I was sick. But when I tried to do stuff while I was sick, I just could*
159 *not focus on it. I would read it again, and I like read something five times, [and] I'm like I don't*
160 *even remember what this is. My partner was like "Just go lay down and stop trying to do it, just*
161 *rest and no matter." I finally just gave up. So, now, I'm starting to get ahead, so that's good yes.*
162 *How many times do you guys get out a week?*

163 **18:20 McMahon** Well my since I'm working from home, I completely lose track of like...
164 "oh my gosh, how many days have I been inside." And then, you know, my fiancée, she still
165 works, so she, you know, her two days off I treat as my weekend. So I will go to the park, really
166 only two days a week. They'll be gone, I mean it can't be two days, but probably just a couple
167 times. Only if necessary, like if we need to go to the store or something. It's been just a little bit
168 more, recently, just because of moving, But yes, me not so much, yes. I'll stay inside for a good
169 two days straight, maybe three days.

170 **19:18 Davis** *Oh, and you and I need our sun.*

171 **19:20 McMahon** I know. Well I'll go [into] my patio, but I don't go out outside to the
172 public. You'll just have to get multiple masks and that's what I did, because I was just like I'm,
173 and stayed more than six feet away. He wore gloves. But yes, I just, I'm crazy.

174 **19:43 Davis** *I feel bad for my grandparents they've been in the house for months on*
175 *end...*

176 **19:48 McMahon** I know, I know. My poor my grandma. I was talking to her on the phone
177 and whenever she needs something, my aunt lives close by to her, so she'll just do like a grocery

178 trip for her and leave it on her porch, and she hasn't like, you know, she'll say *hi* to people from
179 afar. But yeah, she's been stuck in her house...

180 **20:08 Davis** *Yes. I'm glad that I have someone to live with, yes even if I'm sure I get on*
181 *his nerves occasionally.*

182 **20:19 McMahon** Yes, keeps you saying, but also, you're like “oh my god I need my
183 space...”

184 **20:33 Davis** *No but well, at least for me personally, I like my own space. Not all the*
185 *time but once a week, just like, you know, an hour to myself yes. Well I think I'll end the*
186 *interview here, and thank you so much for speaking with me.*

187 **20:56** [Music]