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An Examination of Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic as a “Liminal Space”

Shafquat Towheed

In the space of a few weeks in 2020, the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus into a global pandemic changed the way we work, live, interact and communicate with one another. Prolonged periods of national lockdowns have caused a massive shift of non-essential workers toward homeworking, while at the same time, almost all the public spaces for cultural and social encounter—cinemas and concert halls, theaters, libraries, museums, galleries, festival venues, cafes and bookshops—have been subject to extended periods of closure or severe limitations of access and capacity controls. In the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, mask-wearing and handwashing have become the physical manifestations of a radical change in social practice, while QR codes and social distancing markers have become the semi-otic signs of new liminal contact-free zones, defined by the negative use of physical space. Handshakes, kisses and hugs have been held in abeyance,

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while COVID-19 mitigation strategies around capacity restrictions and physical distancing have meant that for the first time in recent human history, the spaces our bodies do not occupy have become more important than the spaces that they actually fill.

However, one highly unexpected result of the massive rise in home-working has been an extraordinary exposure of domestic surroundings in people's professional working lives. Many (although by no means all) of these domestic settings feature home bookshelves, with the bookshelves often serving as a suitably informed backdrop, suggesting a hinterland of specialist knowledge acquired over many years. Forced to work from home by the unexpected intervention of pandemic-induced quarantine, many white-collar workers scrambled to find suitably appropriate backgrounds of their home offices. In the famous words of *New York Times* journalist Amanda Hess, who was one of the first to comment on this phenomenon, bookshelves have become the "quarantine's hottest accessory" because they stage professional credibility in a visual language that anyone can understand (2020). For those lacking in suitable books at home to stage professional credibility, an entire microeconomy of "books by the foot" swiftly emerged, such as the bespoke curated service offered by Maryland bookseller Wonder Book, aimed specifically at American political and media commentators in Washington DC and the beltway. As Ashley Fetters has observed, the pandemic has generated a "sustained demand for impressive-looking bookshelves" (2020). Such is the pressure to have a suitably impressive backdrop of books on shelves, that some people have gone to ludicrous lengths to fake bookshelf credibility, like former Trump spokesperson, Erin Elmore, who used a fabric sheet printed with the image of populated bookshelves to offer some spurious sense of professionalism; as the Twitter account @BCredibility pointed out, the creases in her unironed sheet gave the game away (@BCredibility 2021). Fake books, as Jessica Pressman has demonstrated, have a long history, so the emergence of fake bookshelf backgrounds in the Zoom era were inevitable (Pressman 2021).

Personal bookshelves had hitherto been a zealously guarded private space, a marker for individual taste and shared only with the select few invited into their owners' households and allowed to scan and glean the titles on display. At the same time, personal bookshelves serve to narrate the lives of their owners while demonstrating the accrual of individual wealth, knowledge and prestige. As Lydia Pyne observes, the mere presence of bookshelves "immediately cue us how we ought to interact with a

room and how much importance or power we assign to it” (2016, 81). Like the longstanding and established culture of the writer’s study, a consecrated space shared only with prior permission and due reverence and utilized to great effect by purveyors of cultural capital and arbiters of taste like the UK’s *The Guardian* newspaper through their Saturday morning “Writers’ Rooms” (2007–2009) column, the pre-pandemic bookshelf is an intimate space. As Tom Mole notes writing just months before the pandemic, “your books reveal who you are [...] they reveal more about us than our appearance, because they are visible markers of an inner life and therefore browsing someone else’s bookshelves is a ‘strangely intimate experience’” (2019, 55).

This physically delimited space has now been unleashed upon the world: where once few people could look at the books on our shelves, now theoretically, almost everyone can. Like the previously contested colonial liminal space and no-contact zone of the harem, extensive and unrelenting homeworking has ripped the veil from an erstwhile private, personal domestic space. Whereas once the personal bookshelf epitomized the private sphere, it has now become one of the most salient fixtures of the public sphere. In the pre-pandemic world, we greeted each other at the doorstep—a liminal space that is literally a threshold—often with a handshake, a bow, a hug, our palms held together, a hand on the heart, or some other form of physical gesture. In the age of the pandemic, the virtual lobby ushers us into what was once a private space, one often already pre-populated with books on shelves. Broadcast and self-published to the world via video conferencing and live streaming on both mainstream and social media platforms, the private bookshelf has been thrust into the unremitting and sometimes merciless glare of public (and self) scrutiny. As some of the other chapters in this volume demonstrate, physical bookshelves broadcast on screen have become sites of self-promotion, contestation, erasure, self-censorship, moral judgment, mythmaking and trolling. Virtual bookshelf backgrounds for online meetings often demonstrate the cultural anxiety, aspiration, or association of the speakers in front of them; they may even communicate longing or nostalgia for actual physical spaces (such as libraries) that during periods of lockdown, could not be occupied by (human) readers. In the space of a few months, “bookcase credibility” has become an intentional (or unintentional) manifestation of accumulated cultural capital; as a marker of perceived professional aptitude, it has relegated the office suit and the business card to temporary obsolescence in one fell swoop. The pandemic bookshelf has accidentally been fashioned

into the most ubiquitous liminal zone anywhere: it is the ostensibly private and personal backdrop for the staging of our public, digitally mediated, professional existence.

Through their physical manifestation of books facing spine first or face forward, bookshelves at once stage the economics of cultural production (I buy books and display them, therefore I am), while also demonstrating a deeper engagement with cultural capital and consumption, such as taste and curation (I display certain types of books, therefore I am a certain type of person). In doing so, the bookshelf has been transformed into a site of three-dimensional material self-fashioning mediated flatly and digitally in two dimensions on screen. In its own way, this act of individual branding is every bit as powerful as the courtly portrait paintings of early modern Europe were in their time. The speaker in front of their personal bookshelf, gesturing at a hinterland of assumed knowledge, curates both themselves and their books: the bookshelf becomes a liminal space mediating between the private and the public, the personal and the professional, the material and the digital. They are both the consumer and the consumed, occupying both the subject and the object space, with the interpretative freight of the bookshelf itself often having the uncanny ability to drown out the message of the human speaker in front of it.

Bookshelves in the pandemic occupy a temporal liminal space: while the pre-pandemic private bookshelf was only partially documented and temporarily exposed (the shared snapshot at a precise time and place) via social media #shelfie culture by the voluntary choice of its owner as critics such as Rodger (2019) has shown, the enforced pandemic practice of working from home has forced books on shelves (running the gamut of domestic arrangements from systematic ordering to total chaos) into the public gaze without time constraints, and without the explicit consent of their occupants, or the authors or publishers of the works on display. Perhaps even more disconcertingly and controversially, pandemic bookshelves also occupy a legal liminal space: in the world of online meetings and public engagement, books on display without the prior consent of their copyright holders could theoretically constitute a violation of copyright, reputational damage to a brand or author, or unlicensed (and potentially subliminal) advertisement. Never has the line between personal and commercial endorsement been so tenuous. Nor has the legal or ethical status of analyzing other people's bookshelves on display been adequately determined. Does this constitute an evolving research methodology for a wealth of material now in the public domain? Or is it potentially a violation of the

individual's right to privacy, a right enshrined in the United Kingdom in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act (1998)?

The pandemic bookshelf as a mediated digital encounter denotes multiple thresholds at once. It serves as the backdrop for online interaction while offering validation and cultural consecration to its participants; it makes explicit the elitist cultural assumptions of the dominant group or class at any given time; despite occupying an ostensibly open online platform, it ruthlessly selectively excludes and includes its intended audience; and through its very existence, it lays bare the stark levels of socioeconomic inequality caused by unimpeded global neoliberalism. The liminal space occupied by bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 pandemic, is explicitly constructed out of global capitalism, and it carries a cost of access that it consistently refuses to acknowledge. The many ways in which socioeconomic inequality are manifest via the production, consumption, curation, use and public display of bookshelves are discussed in more detail in the introduction to this volume.

Drawing upon theoretical perspectives from anthropology, psychology and literary theory, this chapter explores the many ways in which the private-public bookshelf has become the cultural liminal space (and virtual contact zone) *par excellence* during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the extensive global exposure of hitherto private bookshelves has unleashed a wealth of interpretable data, at once both thick and rich, which presents a formidable challenge for researchers in book history, the history of reading, publishing studies, cultural studies, media studies, digital cultures, anthropology and sociology.

LIMINALITY

Derived from the Latin stem *limen*, meaning threshold, anthropologists define liminality as the feeling of disorientation or ambiguity that occurs in the middle of a rite of passage or transition: it is the expression and awareness of in-betweenness. Originally coined by Arnold van Gennep in 1909 to explain *rites de passage* in terms of the anthropology of religion, liminality now has considerable currency in a range of contexts and methodological approaches to understanding human culture (van Gennep 1909). Liminality has both spatial and temporal dimensions and can be applied to individuals, large groups or entire societies. As anthropologists Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra argue, liminality is a “fundamental experience” which “transmits cultural practices, codes,

rituals, and meanings in-between aggregate structures and uncertain outcomes” (2015, 3). Lived experience, Horvath et al. suggest, “transforms human beings—and the larger social circles in which they partake—cognitively, emotionally, and morally, and therefore significantly contributes to the transmission of ideas and formation of structures” (2015, 2). In terms of temporality, we can consider a liminal moment (such as a ritual or rite of passage), a liminal phase (such as puberty), or a liminal epoch (such as being exiled or imprisoned).

The current period of the COVID-19 pandemic can be viewed temporally as a global, collective liminal phase: we are in transit between a pre-pandemic existence that has been lost forever and post-pandemic world that has yet to emerge. As Sarah Wayland has commented in relation to the pandemic, liminality “can provide ways to better understand the foggy, ambiguous space we currently inhabit” especially when we are in “a metaphorical waiting room between one life stage and another” (Wayland 2021). If the COVID-19 pandemic is a waiting room between two distinct phases in human existence, then it is waiting room full of books, many of them visible to us and still (as yet) unscrutinized. Repeated periods of national lockdown meant that for many, the COVID-19 pandemic as a lived experience has taken place primarily in the domestic sphere, and the spaces in which many of us have experienced pandemic liminality have been inside our own homes. The work of Georg Simmel (1994) has highlighted the importance of doors and thresholds as liminal spaces in the domestic sphere, while literary critics such as Subha Mukherji (2011) have explored the poetics of thresholds as liminal spaces in literal, metaphorical and symbolic terms. In architecture, liminal spaces are defined as spaces between one destination and the next: they are highly functional spaces of transit and encounter, but not usually of permanent habitation. In the pre-pandemic world, social scientists such as Harriet Shortt have demonstrated “how and why liminal spaces are used and made meaningful by workers” in occupation settings, and that “when liminal spaces are constructed, by workers, as vital and meaningful to their everyday lives they cease to be liminal spaces and instead become ‘transitory dwelling places’” (Shortt 2014, 1). In terms of working from home during the pandemic, this process of transformation was reversed: dwelling places became transitory liminal spaces for the world of work. Both hastily fashioned and carefully staged home offices equally occupy liminal space: they serve the function of an office space for some hours of the day, before reverting to mixed domestic use or non-use; they also delineate a non-commuting

non-journey between home and the domestic life on one hand, and the working professional life of the office on the other. No longer experienced as a physical journey, the home office and its most credible prop, the bookshelf background, structures and negotiates the daily rite of passage between work and non-work.

In Jungian psychology, individuation and self-realization take place during periods of liminality. The mental work of self-individuation that is materialized and manifest in the bookshelves of readers registers this as a site of liminality. Finally, in terms of conducting ethnographic research, a researcher can be in a liminal state when they are both participating in a cultural practice and observing it. Every single researcher, journalist, blogger or social commentator (myself included) who has so far commented on the cultural phenomenon of bookshelves during the COVID-19 pandemic is in such a liminal state, for they all have bookshelves of their own, have all experienced in one way or another the contingencies of the pandemic as a lived experience, and have all felt obliged to comment on a practice in which they are not just detached observers, but makers of meaning.

THE BOOKSHELF AS A PRIVATE-PUBLIC SPACE

The bookshelf background to countless Zoom meetings has normalized and domesticated a profoundly abnormal situation: the semi-permanent and almost daily intrusion of the office into the home lives of hundreds of millions of people. As such, bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 pandemic, like temples, marketplaces and piazzas before them, have become the ritual site where private space yields to public performance. For the first time in human history, this primary mode of crossing from the private to the public and back again is not negotiated by physical embodied gestures (handshakes, bows, salaams etc.) over a physically defined liminal space (the threshold or doorway), but rather it is staged digitally, and it often comes with books: entire shelving units full of books. While online conference platforms metaphorically talk about virtual lobbies and break out rooms, the participants themselves sit or stand, often with books on shelves behind them demarcating a professional space carved out from within a domestic one. Janus like, these bookshelves both look forward by generating the aura of a workspace categorized by new ways of working, while continuously reminding us that it is not a workspace, just the parody of one: every single bookshelf is the unique record

of human interaction and curation, what Lydia Pyne calls the “book to bookshelf dialectic” of a person or persons (2016, 8).

Criticizing the limits of Habermas’s idea of the public sphere, John Thompson has argued that modern society is typified by a kind of mediated publicness, whose main characteristics are that it is despatialized, non-dialogical (unidirectional) and engages a much wider and more diverse public. Mediated publicness is the “means by which many people can gather information about a few and, at the same time, a few can appear before many; thanks to the media, it is primarily those who exercise power, rather than those over whom power is exercised, who are subjected to a certain kind of visibility” (Thompson 1995, 134). For the first time in history, the pandemic’s enforced home working has brought millions of books on shelves into the public sphere. The many can now see the bookshelves (and presumed inner mental life) of the few, and this was achieved through the older (increasingly obsolescent) medium of linear broadcast television, rather than via the non-linear affordances of digital social media.

While #shelfie culture was already well-established pre-pandemic on digital social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and TikTok, it was broadcast media, especially 24-hour news channels, that had the most immediate impact in terms of the visibility of private bookshelves on public screens from the start of the pandemic. Using AI to scan news channels for the appearance of books, Kaley Leetaru (2021) has shown how books were only visible on screen for a few minutes before the pandemic, but that this figure soon rose to over 30 minutes every day on channels such as BBC News and MSNBC and has stayed this high for over 18 months since. This indicates that private bookshelves have entered the public sphere in a massive and sustained way.

DIGITAL MEDIATION

Writing in *The Medium* (itself a digitally mediated space), Shama Patel (2021) lists the six main manifestations of digital media as (1) infrastructure, that is the internet itself and social platforms; (2) medium, such as a smartphone or tablet; (3) content, such as the expression of an author or creative group; (4) practice, such as production, social interaction of activism using digital media; (5) space, such as social media groups; and (6) culture, such as the beliefs, norms and practices that evolve in digital media spaces such as chatrooms. Uncomfortably straddling the public and private sphere, the previously private personal bookshelf space in the era of

the COVID-19 pandemic has become both a digitally mediated space, and a form of digital mediation; it meets in different ways, all six of the criteria mentioned above.

How is the bookshelf in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic a digitally mediated space? First, the visibility of this previously analog private space (and the privately owned material objects that constitute it) is mediated via digital infrastructure and delivered via a digital medium, such as a laptop, tablet or smartphone; during periods of national lockdown, this was in fact the only way that many people could share or talk about their books. The bookshelf background has generated its own norms and social practices with people commenting about each other's choice of books via chat, blogs, forums and social media posts: all digital media engagement that has its own subcultural expectations, or one might say more critically, its own groupthink. The digital mediation achieved by bookshelves in the pandemic also invites a kind of formalized distant reading: we "read" and interpret the array of information not based on reading the content of their authors (although some of this might be familiar to us), but rather on the material format, visible paratext and contextual information, such as the proximity of books to other books as well as to non-book objects, and of course, the inferred intellectual relationship between books and their owners, or perhaps more correctly, their custodians. In the digital sphere, bookshelves offer yet another liminal space, one represented, encountered, analyzed and processed virtually rather than materially.

I will give you brief examples of two qualitative approaches to interpreting bookshelves in the pandemic from Twitter accounts that have emerged since the start of the pandemic. The most famous is undoubtedly Bookcase Credibility (@BCredibility) which has amassed over 117,000 followers since it was launched in April 2020. Using the slogan, "What you say is not as important as the bookcase behind you," Bookcase Credibility has scrutinized some 492 individuals and their bookshelves, and generally, it adopts a holistic approach, assessing the overall effect and teasing out plausible connections between the organizational structure and intended impression of the bookshelves and their custodians. In contrast, Lockdown Book Detective (@BookLockdown) which has over 7000 followers, adopts an altogether more forensic approach, magnifying images and drilling down to identify specific books on display, often down to the level of identifying a specific edition. Bookcase Credibility's perspective is clearly informed by the social sciences and cultural practice, it is ethnographic in its approach, while Lockdown Book Detective is more bibliographical,

bringing to bear formidable expertise in publishing and librarianship; both approaches offer highly valuable and often unexpected insights into the cultural practice that we might loosely label as the public fashioning of professional credibility under lockdown.

While Franco Moretti's model of quantification gave us literature in the form of graphs, maps and trees, in interpreting bookshelves on display in the pandemic, we might want to think about other forms of visualizing this previous semi-private and now temporarily public data, such as looking at vertical versus horizontal axes of display, heat mapping the location of recurring titles via geographical information systems, and generating comparative chronological, topical or thematic visualizations of proximity relationships. These approaches would provide us with valuable information about how books on shelves as curated by their owners might be in productive dialog with one another. The one thing we should of course always factor into any analysis of digital mediation in relation to bookshelves in the pandemic is that this is invariably, a transmedia practice. The physical aspects of three-dimensional material books and other printed matter are being transmediated to us in digital form via online conferencing or social media platforms, through a series of screens, subject to the particular non-human visual constraints of aspect ratio and variable bandwidth, and discussed either synchronously or asynchronously by a range of people, none of whom are actually physically present in the room being discussed. As such, the accelerated and partially unintended phenomenon of books on screens caused by pandemic homeworking has generated a new virtual liminal space, one rich in data about cultural practices, preferences and tastes.

BOOKSHELVES AS A DATA SOURCE: BIG DATA AND THICK DATA

Domestic bookshelves, unlike publicly accessible ones, are an underexploited source of data for historians of reading. Big data is usually defined as being extremely large data sets that may be analyzed computationally to reveal patterns, trends, and associations, especially relating to human behavior and interactions. Big data is often typified by variety (the type of data), velocity (the speed at which it is gathered), veracity (its accuracy), value (its worth) and variability (structured vs unstructured data). Long before big data analysis came to be of interest to digital humanists, it was

systematically adopted by retailers in relation to stock control, shelf space, consumer behavior, the logistics of supply chains and in determining promotions. In the United Kingdom, it was the supermarket retailer Tesco who pioneered this approach through their Clubcard scheme, launched in 1995. Data science drawing upon image recognition, artificial intelligence and the more rudimentary data points of capture (such as barcode scanning) has systematically reshaped modern retail, as big data consultancy analytics provider Trax Retail argues, “using new image recognition and artificial intelligence technology [...] can collect masses of shelf data (like product placement, shelf share etc.) and combine this with EPOS (electronic point of sale) data. Thanks to state-of-the-art data mining techniques driven by sophisticated algorithms, this raw data can then be utilized to measure, map and utilize space elasticity and improve returns on space” (2017). Big data can be used effectively to manage the correct inflection point for any given product, that is to say, determine how many facings will generate the fastest sales and highest turnover. What flies off the shelf in a bookshop might well be what stays on the shelf at home, or conversely, there might be no active correlation at all; big data analysis would be able to demonstrate the relationship between these two conscious and individual social actions.

Bookshelves as they have proliferated on our screens since March 2020 have in themselves become a manifestation of another kind of big data. Indeed, the sheer volume of book titles on screen caused by the pandemic has generated one of the largest (and most incomplete) book scanning episodes in human history; tens of millions of privately owned books have been exposed without specific prior consent or permission to the digital public sphere via online meeting and broadcast platforms, almost all of which are owned by corporations wedded to algorithmic big data harvesting and analysis. While the recoverable information capture from artificial intelligence scanning of books on screen is currently rudimentary and would have to be corroborated and enriched by human intervention, the partial metadata (author, title, potentially format, editor, translator, cover image if displayed, and by inference language of text) that might theoretically be gathered still represents a wealth of real time consumer data, based on the books that people value and are willing to display: effectively, an actual metric of cultural capital on display, and a data point that can be triangulated against book sales through electronic point of sale data, such as that gathered by Nielsen BookScan. The aggregated data of books on display would potentially be of huge use for publishers, for it directly

indicates which books are valued more than others in the medium to long term, thereby identifying titles and authors for both value addition (price hikes) and promotional focus (discounting); it might also nuance publishers' understanding of how consumers value the long tail of literary publishing, by identifying books which are out of print but still on display on people's shelves. The fact that the content of these books (the text inside) is practically invisible to us and beyond the reach of a big data approach suggests that any sustained analysis of the phenomenon of bookshelves in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot depend on a quantitative big data approach alone.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) used the concept of "thick description" as a record of subjective interpretations and meaning to supplement the researchers' empirical observation; first espoused in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, this approach has been taken further in the twenty-first century by Tricia Wang (2013), who has championed the concept of "thick data." Thick data according to Wang

primarily relies on human brain power to process a small "N" while big data analysis requires computational power (of course with humans writing the algorithms) to process a large "N." Big Data reveals insights with a particular range of data points, while Thick Data reveals the social context of and connections between data points. Big Data delivers numbers; thick data delivers stories. Big data relies on machine learning; thick data relies on human learning. (Wang 2013)

As Wang's work has demonstrated, thick data has been particularly useful for market researchers trying to understand complex consumer behavior, a practice which is inherently subjective and emotional and one which is almost always expressed in terms of narrative.

Blending thick data with big data is now increasingly an influential approach taken by policymakers in government, as Policy Lab (part of the United Kingdom government's Cabinet Office) argues, thick data can allow policymakers to "handle the emotional perspectives captured in data from individuals" by using emotion "as a source of evidence" (2020). Taking an ethnographic approach, Policy Lab (2020) have used "big data to see the big picture before then using thick data to zoom in to the detail of people's lived experience" on the basis that while "big data can give us cumulative evidence at a macro, often systemic level, thick data provides insights at an individual or group level."

The increasingly visibility of bookshelves in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic has opened up data which is inherently “thick” with personal emotions which could be used as sources of evidence in terms of the socio-economic and cultural practices of book buying and reading. Pandemic bookshelf backdrops, whether physical or virtual, are inherently human curated, whether incidentally, accidentally or purposefully. Physical bookshelf backdrops offer up a wealth of thick data evidence of human emotional and personal engagement with books. Some of this is visible, such as spines, titles, book cover art and the proximal relationship between books and other objects on the shelves; all of these indicate personal investment in terms of the opportunity costs of time, money, taste and cultural or professional aspiration. However, much of the thick data offered by these books are tantalizingly out of sight, for they are inside the books: these include marks of ownership such as names, and marks of use such as folded corners, marginalia, dedications and inscriptions, post it notes, bookmarks, and ephemera, such as pressed flowers.

Every book on a shelf tells a story of personal interaction and engagement, of positive selection rather than evolutionary extinction, even if it has not been opened or read: the mere fact of ownership and display—how the book has come to be on the shelf—is in itself a personal narrative, part of a life history and a self-identity shaped in part through the emotional and psychological attachment to particularly types of individually owned (rather than collectively shared) books. As Leah Price observes, books have the ability to become “a proxy for a new kind of self” and effectively provide physical evidence of individual emotional and psychological mental development: “show me how you want to read, and I’ll show you who you want to be” (2019, 15). Writing just months before the pandemic forced our private bookshelves into the unremitting gaze of online meetings and broadcast media, Annie Austen argues that bookshelves are a window on the soul: “your bookshelves are not just a place where you keep your books,” she argues, but rather, “they are a physical manifestation of the inner you. Your library is also your autobiography” (2019, 14).

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered an exceptional temporal liminality: the phenomenon of hundreds of millions of domestic bookshelves, replete with the as yet unnarrated life stories of their owners, suddenly made visible for all to see and read. Replete with thick data, this is an open invitation for ethnographers, anthropologists, sociologists and book historians to follow-up on-screen scrutiny with in-person interview, to give

voice to the millions of individual life stories through the evidence of books on shelves, before much of this window of visibility tapers away as some home workers start returning to their offices. While big data and artificial intelligence can quantify titles, aggregate shelf-space, and model the socioeconomics of consumption, only thick data can explain human personal and emotional interaction with books, the ways in which these apparently passive objects sitting on our shelves give meaning to our lives. Tricia Wang cogently observes that in the world of data, “what is measurable isn’t the same as what is valuable” (2016) and I would argue that nowhere is this more the case than in the recent data deluge of privately owned books on screen caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

CODA

While it might seem easy to classify, catalog and analyze the bookshelf in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic as a uniquely temporal cultural phenomenon, which it certainly is, any detailed investigation needs to consider at least some of the following caveats. First, the bookshelves that have entered the public digital sphere since March 2020 were overwhelmingly purchased, curated, arranged and accumulated *before* the pandemic forced us all to stay at home. As such, while public visibility suggests a snapshot in time, the freight of evidence of books on shelves clearly indicates years, if not decades, of self-fashioning through books. Historians of reading will of course be perfectly aware of the incongruities between historical contingency and the *longue durée*: if you are investigating reading during the First World War, for example, where does that examination of reading as a social practice begin, and where does it end? This is just as true of any examination of bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 pandemic—an age which has yet to be defined and has still not concluded. The pandemic bookshelf is therefore in some senses, a misnomer: it is a bookshelf made visible due to the pandemic, rather than one created by it. The bookshelves created by the pandemic itself are still being amassed and curated, and many are yet to appear in public; as with all historical periods, the age of the pandemic will be retrospectively identified and its chronological period fixed (and contested) by future generations. Second, the invitation to examine these newly exposed bookshelves, bursting with rich and thick data of the evidence of ownership, usage and reading, threatens to generate a massive data bias, for the quick win of visible evidence blinds us to the kind of reading that is harder to recover and leaves less trace,

such as e-reading or audiobooks. This is particularly important when digital reading (and audiobooks) have seen a surge in both pedagogical and recreational use during periods of lockdown when physical access to libraries, bookshops and educational institutions has been curtailed. Third, examining bookshelves in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic based on the evidence available in the public sphere inherently privileges elite, rather than mass cultural consumption: the bookshelves on screen overwhelmingly belong, as Sky News journalist Adam Boulton noted, to the 7% of households who own more than 500 books (2020). Where does this leave the 93% of the population, almost all of them readers in one way or another, without the formidable acreage of books on display? And finally, perhaps the most obvious point to make in a twenty-first-century Instagram and TikTok driven existence which is both visually saturated and overdetermined: the visual phenomenon of the private bookshelf has publicly manifest itself as a result of the pandemic, but it has made no concessions to the visually impaired. Have you ever tried to write an image descriptor for that performative contingent practice of a person in front of their bookshelves in an online meeting during the pandemic? The virtual liminal space of bookshelves on screen generated by this occupational shared practice is inherently, even explicitly, exclusionary: it invites participation and engagement via screens, while failing to make itself equally accessible for the visually impaired.

I want to end with one final thought about the kinds of liminal space indicated by this contingent cultural phenomenon of bookshelves in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic: one which is still in the process of working itself out in a competitive, evolving media ecosystem. In her landmark and brilliantly observed pre-pandemic study *Bookshelf*, Lydia Pyne observes that “some bookshelves are like massive megafauna” while other bookshelves (such as personal ones) are “smaller, less enormously built [...] these other kinds of bookshelves in the literary landscape offer different niches and different adaptations for styles of shelves” (2016, 100). In this respect, the emergence of COVID-19 has been a momentary (and partial) mass extinction event: for much of the last 19 months, the megafauna of institutional bookshelves has been supplanted in personal use as well as the public consciousness by the smaller, nimbler, more warm-blooded and personally adapted bookshelves that we ourselves, have assembled, curated, cherished, valued and spent time looking at.

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