

Research article

Shelves of Books, Piles of Books, References and Lists of Books as Performances of Metrics and Expertise by Anna Nguyen

Gazing at Bookshelves

Since the pandemic, I have participated in or attended many virtual lectures and conferences. Inevitably, I have seen numerous personal libraries, libraries in offices, or walls of books strategically peeking from behind the speaker. Academics, in particular, have spectacular bookshelves. The shelves are overflowing with books, enough to make the bookcases abundant and full, but organized enough so their spines reveal evidence of the title and the author's name. And the collection of each speaker is a reflection of their research area. An author and professor in a literature department has rows of fiction. Someone who studies food has cookbooks in addition to their stacks of scholars' monographs published by university presses. A scholar in a field like science and technology studies (STS) will have books with words such as "data", "the Internet", "political economy", and "digital" in their titles.

As I look beyond their bookcases, my eyes rest on my own book stacks. It's quite a contrast, staring at the speakers' beautiful and bountiful bookcases and then at the unorganized and uneven piles I have on the floor, next to small, white IKEA shelves that house even more books, many titles hidden behind a front-facing row. Because my camera is

pointed towards my kitchen area, my “expertise” is not readily revealed.

Of course, not all speakers sit in front of their books and bookshelves. Yet, the bookshelf has become quite the decorative backdrop as many of us, since the pandemic, have shifted our work lives from office spaces to remote spaces. There is a sense of disruption in the work routine and a sense of performing expertise has been carried over to the bookshelf. This observation is not controversial. In May of this year, as many of us began our dependency on Zoom and other similar virtual applications, *The New York Times* has published at least two articles on the bookshelf trend phenomenon. An article written by Amanda Hess is titled “The ‘Credibility Bookcase’ is the Quarantine’s Hottest Accessory”. Hess cites the anonymous Twitter account, “Bookcase Credibility” (@BCredibility) whose first tweet was released on April 20, as the titular focus for her piece. The account documents the phenomenon of experts and politicians who provide testimony during the ongoing lockdown or remote interviews. These people are always speaking to us with a bookcase behind them.

Hess’ argument is simple: “the bookcase has become the preferred background for applying a patina of authority to an amateurish video feed” reads the sub headline. In the article, Hess outlines numerous celebrities, TV hosts, and politicians who rely on books to speak for them. “The aesthetics of credibility often go overlooked,” Hess writes, noting that the particular look of “cerebral authority” in the United States is often of “a white man in a dark suit”. But like any symbolic representation, these images can shift and transform. Hess’ point is

that the pandemic has gestured to a new symbolic and visual form of respectability and credibility. “The bookcase,” Hess writes, “offers both a visually pleasing surface and a gesture at intellectual depth. Of all the quarantine judgments being offered right now, this one feels harmless enough. One gets the sense that for the bookcase-background type, being judged by their home libraries is a secret dream finally realized.”

Oddly, another *New York Times*’ article written by Shannon Doyne and Michael Gonchar in the Student Opinion page, released in the same month as Hess’ piece, basically summarizes the idea of books as representative of the person. In the very brief article, the authors end with a list of questions, one of which asks “do you think the books sitting on someone’s bookshelf say anything about that person, even if the person never reads them? Do you have any books in your home that say something about you?”

There appears to be an ontological underpinning left unexplored in these very short pieces. The content, or the context, of the books are not actually reflected. The blueprint for such recent interrogation is from a Twitter account, whose only biographical statement offers, “What you say is not as important as the bookcase behind you.” There is already, whether humorously tongue-in-cheek or not, a clear point that books have significant meaning for us. The focus is on the object themselves, as if they can “speak” for the humans. This is a point of contention in some STS literature, mainly in the Latourian reading of our relationship with non-humans. Many have romanticized the role of agency of voiceless objects as if they have their own agency; yet, as

Bruno Latour has attempted to remind us, that humans give “things” agency or power (Latour 138, 142-145). When they perform, they perform for us and are dependent on the sociopolitical situations. A book’s material form only really comes alive through our discussions of them or when we cite them.

Citations as Assembling and Enrolling Expertise

The connection between books, bookshelves, the pandemic, and expertise is not a new phenomenon. Credibility through books has existed long before digital politics and remote communication. Oftentimes, I find myself thinking about the vast amount of books in my professors’ offices. In one of my classes, a professor told his student that the recommended books on his syllabus are not only “great scholarship” but it is a good thing to have books, even if they are unread, in our possession.

One can see that the credibility bookcase has long been a source of tension, conflict, and exclusion in our works' cited lists, our citational practices, on syllabi, and in carefully curated anthologies. Even more recent, and before COVID, is the online community of “bookstagrammers” on various digital platforms. The common thread is the focus of what someone is reading or what someone will read. The placement of the books is used to build a credible reputation within a community. Specifically, regarding the current wave of testimonies from experts, we could consider that their deliberate placement of their bookshelves is a gesture to extending books as

citational forces or citational allies. For the experts, citations are the performative and strategic ally we use in our daily life practices.

The politics of citations have been most recently interrogated by Sara Ahmed. In an often-quoted sentiment in *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed writes “Citation is a feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow” (15-16). For Ahmed, she encourages her readers to read more feminist scholars of color who have both been influential in her own work and those who were in conversation with dominant white scholars. This is where the disconnect between reader, or audience, and the text happens. We treat the books and texts as speaking to us, rather than view them as a document in which the authors are responding or interrogating someone or something in society. The text cannot be voiceless and be read without the authorial presence, despite what Roland Barthes expresses (142).

Further, Ahmed, “citations can be feminist bricks: they are materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings. My citation policy has affected the kind of house I have built” (16). Here, Ahmed may be referring to a canonical responsibility, a discussion of its limitations, and her desires for a better kind of academic discipline or program. There is a poetic and normative critique in Ahmed’s vision for a citational practice. And perhaps there is one in Latour’s attempt to add rhetorical studies into his STS program. Books in our citational practices “speak” to us passively as a text, but actively to strengthen the author’s arguments and claims. Citations are, in the Latourian

sense, an “appeal to higher and more numerous allies” (31); the references are prestigious because they are all about numbers (33). They perform, despite the fact that many references may be misquoted or wrong, because they are displayed (34). For Latour, the context of a citation is “how one text acts on others to make them more in keeping with its claims” (35).

Look at any scholarly book or journal article with a reference list or just the citations that rest within their parentheticals. The more lists and citations, the better, for the empirical impact rests on the numbers and not so much on the arguments the author is actually trying to make. Latour calls this an enrollment of expertise. Just citing them, even if the text or normative arguments have been misinterpreted or reinterpreted for the interlocutor’s strategic purposes, is a curated collection of supposed allies. And even if they are cited as a gesture to the differences in scholarship, this, too, is an act of performativity. The authors tell the readers that they have surveyed the literature and are well-suited to tell us they are capable of using such sources.

Bookshelves as Works Cited

Reading a text and citing a text can lead to epistemic contestations, and this is why Barthes’ argument of “the death of the author” continues to be a problem in the way we treat texts. Who reads what correctly will always be a question. But with bookshelf credibility there has been a shift from the content of the text to the physical and material aspects of the book itself, as we see in Hess’ article, Doyne and Gonchar’s summary of the article, and their seemingly innocuous

observation that these credible books may have been untouched and unread. I see it too in my professor's admission that books are, indeed, credible decor in an office or home space. Yet, Hess' sweeping declarative statement that books are the newest form of credibility is hyperbolic. Books and texts have long been assembled to perform expertise and credibility. What may be notable is that many books have traveled beyond institutions of gatekeeping, out of libraries and departmental homes. It is not uncommon for non-academics to read academic texts, or for academics to use fiction and poetry in their own research practices. The problem isn't about the bookshelves themselves, but about whose words and works are cited constantly outside of their intended normative underpinnings. This possibility that expertise can be crafted, through one's own understanding of themselves, experiences, and hopes for books outside of their community, is a symptom of reflexive modernity (Beck, Giddens, & Lash 2-8).

The significance of the books and bookcases during this exceptional COVID time is that we've tried to apply new meanings to our relationships with them. We have not. Our reliance on expertise has been more visible, and this is a direct cause of us finally paying attention to the bookshelves of others. Although we cannot count the numerous books on these shelves, we are amazed by the mere sight of an abundant collection. The metrics of the bookshelves are another reminder of the importance of credible lists. The quantity is much more important than the quality or even authorial intent.

And, of course, if we think of credibility, expertise, lists, and spaces, we cannot think of them as any less exclusionary than a more traditional institution. Books and bookshelves should not be the basis of credibility, nor are they free of the contexts in which they exist. They need not be a fetishized object, at once active and politics-free, in which they replace human voices. The texts and books are as fallible as their creators are. We are faced, as always, with the challenge of creating equitable and inclusive epistemic communities with books as a way to navigate these concerns.

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