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WHAT SHELFIES CAN TELL US ABOUT PANDEMIC LIFE

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There are two stories to tell in this multimodal special issue of *Digital Culture and Education*. One story involves a group of female academics in need of inspiration during pandemic days who decided to produce a **multimodal** special issue. The other story is a colourful whistle-stop tour of public and private shelves. The through-line connecting both stories is Covid lives lived over a multitude days and ways framed by objects, rites, restrictions interspersed with nature walks, YouTube yoga, and cats on keyboards. Shimmering, fragile, and captive, pandemic life remains in our minds and hearts forever. This issue visualises these extraordinary moments through shelves of all sorts, shapes, and sizes.

The story of the multimodal special issue rests on the hope and ambition to animate eight authorial teams' versions of the shelfie as a methodological means for probing contemporary social lives, whilst uniting transdisciplinary agendas of social science research such as multimodality, materiality, social media, digitality, and identity. Simply defined, a **shelfie** is a picture of a shelf, typically a bookshelf. As a visual genre, the shelfie is a digital re-take on the "still life self-imaging" (Zappavigna & Zhao, 2020), where artists of the yesteryears attempted to capture the artistic self in drawings of their tools such as paintbrushes. Conceptually, the shelfie rooted in the seminal work of Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday life* (1978) in which Goffman analysed how individuals 'perform' in order to project a desirable image, using the theatre to illustrate individuals' contrasting frontstage and backstage behaviour (Bullingham, Vasconcelos, 2013).

To experience them meaningfully demands multiple modes of expression and representation (Kress, 2010). It is one thing to aspire to edit a multimodal special issue, it is yet another to have the expertise and acumen to make it happen. We made it happen, but if we were honest, it arrives with mixed results. Through the **support and creative flair** of Harriet Hand and Nick Gray, and all of the *Digital Culture and Education* Co-Editors of this open access digital journal, authors have produced partially multimodal articles. With one soundscape by Shillitoe and Hand, many images and words, and no moving images, we worked within our limited design skills and within the constraints of a website. Every article in the issue has been peer-reviewed for content and design and all of the authors have responded substantively and aesthetically to our guidance. In the spirit of multimodality, in this introduction, we have embedded images and **redacted text** (Hand, 2021) as key words that stand out for each of us. Such is the brief story of the multimodal dimension of the special issue, and now onto the story of shelves.

The art of the shelfie entails visualising material worlds and sharing them, or not, with a group of people. Shelfies bridge inside and outside, public and private, memories and interests on shelves. Typically, a shelfie displays books in the background, but they do not have to – in the issue you

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will see varied shelfie interpretations from board games to plants to digital bitmoji shelves. In this way, a shelfie can serve as a participatory channel to mediate ideas, provocations, and subjectivities through objects. In the special issue, Lanson and Richardson talk about **listening to** what shelfies say about domesticity and gendered politics and Tietzmann, Teixeira, Kalil, and da Silva discuss critically framing shelves for what they can tell us about macro forces like media companies within micro contexts like people's homes.

Lurking beneath accounts of humans, shelves, and objects are deeper issues of knowing and being with objects (Bryant, 2011). It is clear from the myriad portraits of shelves you are about to observe that shelves with objects (**actual** and **figurative** shelves) can tell us so much about who we are, what we value, and how we live. There are many assumptions and presumptions within such a statement – not least of which that we even have a shelf on which to hold objects. But, with this caveat in mind, the special issue travels from Brazil to Australia to the Netherlands, to the US, Canada, and the UK and elsewhere to explore curated bookshelves as complex, microscopic, intimate, portraits of lives.

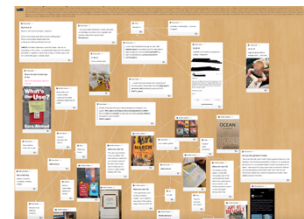
Why shelfies you may ask? Shelfies capture the dollhouse effect of the pandemic. The Janus-faced Covid life silent and shapeless set within intimate spaces and pieces from our lives. Within the special issue one of the more compelling pictures of intimate shelves of pandemic self is Shillitoe, Hand, and Rowsell's *Alone together* article and accompanying sound text. The research upon which the article is based spans ages and homes to uncover how different individuals experienced Covid life through **mapping events**. Pulling on senses and stimuli, the article presents 12 shelves of self with a dynamic, moving bricolage involving events, objects, and sentiments sitting on figurative curated shelves. As you read the article, there is a rhythm that runs through it with careful listening and attention to details and thoughts. You could spend a while lingering over this visual essay.



In what ways are shelves about people and their relationships? Shelves reveal our relationships with the world and what or who matters



to actually sit on our shelves. You will see this in Scott, Lemieux, and Johnston's article that reveals an **unsettling side**



of Covid work life – on display amongst discomfiting, vulnerable private moments. The thematic visual essay gives first-hand accounts of the ways that three women navigated personal and professional selves as 'assembling' (Johnston,

2019) moments. Scott, Lemieux, and Johnston took the trope of shelfie seriously over several months meeting and excavating their material worlds and their agentic roles in their habits and roles. Similarly, Allsop, Rzyankina, Kucirkova, Rowsell, Wildfeuer and Zhao move into **shelf identity** by traveling through their work/home bookshelves that throw into relief the powerful role of objects to express the relentlessness of work; iconic memories; and associations with people and times. The shelfie study that they conducted over several months involved interviews about their shelves and what they reveal about their relationships with work, family, and memories.

What happens when you listen to shelves? There are three articles that sediment macro-, meso-, micro-pandemic trends across spaces and places. Tietzmann, Teixeira, Kalil, and da Silva move into Brazilian broadcasting practices during Covid collecting broadcast stills across four shows over

eight months analysing what they say about properties and tensions of public media work in private homes. **Objects that populate shelves** behind reporters tell stories and reveal subjectivities in ways that have never recorded before in history (to such an extent). Brown moves into **curated shelves** stacked with board games that display not only his love of games, but also his pedagogical lens that promotes playful, problem-solving teaching methods. So too Doyle and her tour of artifacts and ornaments imbued closeness and cosiness to her preservice teaching – inviting students into her home as a sustaining relational space during lockdown teaching. For these articles, **shelves are meaningful participants in conversations** and essential players in experiencing pandemic life.



What can shelves awaken? Clearly from other special issue articles, shelfies display lives lived, but they also can and ignite attentive, participatory listening practices through creative probing. Lanson and Richardson’s article features research with 13 mothers and their respective experiences of mediating shelfies to explore aspects of motherhood.

#listeningtomediatedmothers is a research study that combines curated domestic spaces with the performativity of Instagram shelfies. **Disrupting pandemic gender and economic inequalities** that took place during lockdown, 13 mothers archived and shared shelves that assembled aspects of motherhood within their home spaces or performed within Instagram posts. Attending to shelves as **‘networked tropes of self’** Lanson and Richardson make a statement about our complex and dynamic movements across domestic and digital worlds. The final article in the issue takes us into digital shelves that signal cultures, languages, and that puts educators inside of the shelfie experience. Abas, Park, Munyaneza, and Im invite us into bitmoji digital book shelves filled with **themed digital book shelves with varied lenses on teaching and learning.**



The production of the special issue, from its inception to the final publication, spanned the critical years of the global Covid pandemic. At the time when the special issue is online, the communities and societies around the globe are resuming and readjusting to the **‘new normal’**. We hope the special issue has captured the multitudes of lives at this historical juncture—private and public, individuals and communities, intellectual and domestic, lived and imagined, and digital and material—in a singular image of our time.

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