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## **‘It became an anchor for stuff I really want to keep’: The stabilising weight of self-storage when moving home and away**

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### **Abstract**

The process and stresses of moving home are a common experience in our lives, and few find sorting and packing household possessions easy. When moves are temporary, uncertain or contingent on other factors it can be particularly difficult to know what to take with us, so renting a self-storage unit allows for movement and mobility without the need to reduce the material convoy or make premature decisions on what to keep or dispose of. Contrary to previous research, which has focused on the purchase or divestment of objects during life course transitions, house moves and experiences of mobility, this paper argues that the practice of storing objects is equally as important. The data for this paper is drawn from object-elicited interviews undertaken in the UK with three women who were motivated to rent self-storage to store their household possessions when moving to a new home temporarily or more permanently, across the country and abroad, in the pursuit of different opportunities (education, work, lifestyle change). Self-storage is seen to both accommodate materiality caught up in feelings of uncertainty and indecision, and anchor possessions which collectively stand-in for a sense of home when itself is not yet remade.

**Keywords:** material culture, mobility, anchor, home, moving house, storage

## Introduction

Moving home is a significant moment experienced by most over the course of their life, and the practices of sorting through and packing household possessions in order to move and remake home are central to the experience. A great deal of work has explored the significance of material culture in the home, from its placement and visibility in identity practices (Gorman-Murray, 2008; Peters, 2011; Rose, 2010) to everyday experiences of 'living with things' (Gregson, 2007). It is widely agreed that domestic objects are '...more than mere "things", they are [...] a material testament of who we are, where we have been and perhaps even where we are heading' (Hecht, 2001, p. 123), and collectively they create our sense of home. Similar concerns are addressed in several mobilities studies which attempt to understand how the (im)mobility of possessions impact upon experiences of recreating home and belonging (Parrott, 2012). Usually, our possessions move with us when we move but there are occasions when this does not occur, as a result of uncertain or knowingly temporary situations (e.g. short-term work commitments or home renovations). In these circumstances, a growing number of people rent self-storage units to keep their household items secure and safe until they are ready to move them in or have more permanent accommodation.

Previous research on the material practices undertaken in the adaption to new home environments, and life transitions more generally, has focused upon the disposition of possessions (see Gentry et al., 1995; Price et al., 2000; Young, 1991), and this being the key facilitator in reducing the felt burden of moving. A handful of papers acknowledge the valorisation of lightness in experiences of moving home (Marcoux, 2001), and the difficulty of sorting through household possessions (Horton & Kraftl, 2012). Yet whilst these practices are important, this paper argues that dispossession is only part of the story and storage in self-storage units also plays a significant role in facilitating the process of moving house, particularly for those whose moves are temporary, uncertain or incomplete. Drawing from interviews with three women who were, to varying degrees, between homes, this paper brings to light the necessary immobilisation of possessions for the re-evaluation and mooring of (changing) identities and the eventual (re)making of home.

This research is focused around the contemporary geography of self-storage, an industry which did not exist in the UK until thirty years ago and has doubled in size over the last decade. Across the UK there are now about 1,900 self-storage stores, which cover around 49 million square feet (SSA UK, 2020, p.8). There are plenty of triggers for putting things in storage and many of these are related to life-changing moments in the users' life, but it's moving that is at the heart of self-storage, which accounts for at least 41% of personal (as opposed to business) users (SSA UK, 2020, p.

52). For many people self-storage is a short-term, temporary solution to a pressing need. Others, however, use the space as more of a permanent satellite and integrate it into their everyday lives. Despite the growing prevalence of self-storage, the thesis from which this paper draws is the only qualitative study that explicitly focuses on experiences of the phenomenon in relation to mobility, home and the life course, and one of a handful that acknowledges its place within domestic practices (Beck, 2016 a notable exception).

The paper is organised as follows: firstly, relevant literature concerning domestic materiality, mobility and the meaning of home is mapped out. Next, the research methodology is outlined, placing the narratives of this paper within the wider research project setting. Finally, the paper turns to a discussion of findings examining each of the three participants in turn, focusing on the practicalities and emotional contingencies of using self-storage during their moves home and away.

### **Theorising materiality, mobility and moving home**

The scholarship which informs this paper covers domestic materiality, mobility and the meaning of home. Starting with the latter, the meaning of home has been continually theorised since the mid-1970s to the point of scholars being accused of list fetishism (Gurney 1990; Heywood 2005, p. 533-4). In spite of these critiques, the importance of 'rootedness' in the experiential character of at-homeness (Seamon, 2015 [1979], p. 79; Somerville, 1989), and earlier definitions of home as a 'restorative, anchoring, productive and insulating shell' (Sibley, 1995, p. 130), are still pertinent today as the normative vision of the ideal home. Critical engagements since – initiated by feminist and post-modern scholars – have problematized this traditional, sedentarist bias that sees home as fixed, bounded and enclosed, and led us to focus on the diverse ways people 'do' or 'feel' home (Ahmed, 1999; see Massey, 1992). Resultantly the conception of home has moved beyond the dwelling to other spaces that materially and imaginatively connect people and places across time and space, leading to Ralph and Staeheli (2011, p. 519) stating that 'mobility and stasis, displacement and placement as well as roots and routes go into the making of home'. It is these later, more nuanced theorisations of the meaning of home upon which this research builds, in particular work which emphasizes the fluid, disordered and unbounded nature of home as it is made, unmade, and remade over the life course. This paper attests to the temporal, material and spatial fluidity of the home, and its '*unmaking*', which occurs as a result of 'a seemingly unending variety of factors: financial, conjugal, socio-political and so on' (Nowicki, 2014, p. 788), as well as its intersection with mobility and precarity (Bergan et al. 2020). Fluid meanings of home are bound up with typical life course transitions (marriage, divorce, arrival of children, bereavement, career change etc.) and experienced by most at some point in their housing biographies (Baxter &

Brickell, 2014, p. 135). At these points, it may be necessary for the home to be broken down into its constituent material parts and reassembled elsewhere.

The fluidity of the home in material terms is most recognisable when moving to a new home. Marcoux (2001) describes how moving house constitutes a key moment to sort through things which may have multiplied during an extended period of residency in one place. Moving becomes a means to re-evaluate relationships and memories by bringing them back into consciousness when needing to make decisions about what is worth packing and what should be discarded. Clearing out and packing an entire home and thereby sorting through a 'lifetime's worth of stuff', is 'a process of literally laying out, laying bare and laying to bear a lifetime past' (Horton & Kraftl, 2012, p. 41). Bringing household and biographical objects<sup>i</sup> into a 'heightened zone of scrutiny' is a profound moment when our past and imagined future identities are exposed and reviewed (Gregson, 2007, p. 164). Instability and uncertainty in future life events are instrumental in forming the meaningfulness of an object. As Marcoux (2001, p. 77) highlights, our things can appear to be 'cumbersome companions' on the occasion of moving, as we must make difficult decisions based upon the 'weight' or value of their memory, as well as their future potential use. Gregson (2007) conceptualises this as the 'gap in accommodation', which results in decisions that take into account the capacity of things to be re-contextualised in new circumstances.

The difficulty in sorting, in order to move house, not only comes from evaluating and (potentially) separating from an object considered to have sentimental value but also from determining how to go about the process: 'what to begin with, where to start or which priorities to put forth' (Marcoux, 2001, p. 80). Horton and Kraftl (2012) observe, that whilst the process of sorting and packing may begin with good intentions (to pass on, dispose and slim down possessions) there comes a time in many moves when having to deal with stuff (the quantity of which was previously hidden) grows tiresome or time runs out. As a result, stuff is thrown in boxes containing an assortment of bits and pieces, deferring decisions on their fate until a later date, when the move is over and done. In reality these boxes of 'random stuff' linger, this haunting presence of incompleteness constituting an absent-presence that can be felt as a sense of guilt (Hetherington, 2004). One might interpret any objects that could not be ascertained as mattering, or that survive the initial sort when they should have been disposed of, as a material reminder of the emotional difficulties and frustrations present in making a life-course transition. The integration of self-storage into the process of moving may impact upon the extent that sorting is prioritised or handled. Since we take things with us when we move (Buchli & Lucas, 2000), it can be argued that discarding and throwing away things 'becomes a means to enable geographical mobility' (Gregson et al., 2007, p. 697). Along these lines, Marcoux (2001, p. 82) describes how mobility can

be related to lightness, and detachment from things can be valorised as enabling freedom.

Turning towards the mobilities literature, there is an understanding that for people with a lifestyle characterised by mobility, movement is experienced through both roots and routes (see Hannam et al., 2006), and for individuals whose mobilities have moored them in multiple places for extended periods of time one place may no longer take primacy as 'home' over another (Cohen et al., 2015, p. 163). For those who write on travel and home, such as Ahmed (1999), home and away are not oppositional experiences or concepts. In making this argument, she argues that home is not a fixed or bounded singular space of belonging and identity, but may be other places or relationships (see also hooks, 1990; Massey, 1992). Home then, for Ahmed (along with Gurney, Somerville and others), is a matter of the presence of affect or particular feelings. In experiences of mobility, moving things too soon can 'cast an uncomfortably premature permanence on the whole migration project' (Burrell, 2014, p. 160), and people may simply not want to take all their belongings with them to a temporary situation as it does not 'feel like' home (Brickell & Datta, 2011; Burrell, 2008). As we'll see later, self-storage at this time can stand in as another 'home' (for things).

The challenge that has been identified within mobilities scholarship is how to 'conceptualise the simultaneity of home as sedentary and as mobile' (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011, p. 518).<sup>ii</sup> As Bissell (2007) highlights relative stillness is important in worlds of mobility. Immutability of possessions, and the memories, emotions and relationships they stand in for, can be viewed as rootedness or anchoring in place. Hoskins (1998, p. 8) proposes that: 'At a spatial level, the biographical object limits the concrete space of its owner and sinks its roots deeply into the soil. It anchors the owner to a particular time and place'. As our possessions, in general, are located in our homes, their anchoring requires the stability of that space. It follows then, that there is a need to ensure home is firmly embedded in a place – 'a stabilising weight when all around is in flux' – particularly to manage unsettled feelings that have been generated by moving abroad (Butcher, 2010, p. 25). Our desire to anchor ourselves and our possessions, and 'stabilise and shut places down emanates from a far wider context of precarity, change [and] uncertainty' (Burrell, 2014, p. 163). Movement has a bearing on the constitution of home as the boundaries of self, home and away are permeable and impact on one another (Ahmed, 1999, p. 341). Seamon (2015 [1979], p. 80) states that 'rootedness is established through physical action and requires time to develop. [...] the person who changes places must re-establish rootedness each time [s]he moves.' An emerging area within mobilities and home-making literature notes how mobility can inhibit home-making practices and make it more difficult to establish a sense of belonging as home is made and unmade over the life course (see Bate 2018; Bergan et al. 2020). However, this does not mean that home cannot be made and

made meaningful for people who move, but rather that they need to seek a sense of home and security in other ways (Saunders, 1989, p. 187).

Moving house – sorting through possessions, experiencing new places, and attempting to re-make home – is a means to reflect over one’s biography and question what is important in different spheres of everyday life. Our material ‘convoy’ – those things we take with us, keep and curate - enables a temporal ‘bridge’ between an individual’s past and ‘an idealised version of life as it should be lived’ (McCracken, 1988, p. 100); it is the lens through which to view retrospective (Hecht, 2001) or possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As Attfield (2000, p. 265) states, the material world ‘interrupts the flow of time to restore a sense of continuity as well as to reflect change and contain complex and apparently irreconcilable differences’. Our routine practices of sorting and storing when moving home play a significant role in the (re)formation and (re)making of family and home, and allow us to deal with the changes to these same formations (Horton & Kraftl, 2012, p. 33). This paper argues that practices of immobilising possessions by putting them in self-storage can, therefore, be thought to be characteristic of larger tendencies and experiences of instability and uncertainty, such as moving home and away.

## **Methodology**

The data for this paper is drawn from in-depth interviews with three women recruited as part of a larger study into the motivations and experiences of using self-storage in the UK. Small-scale, intimate studies are particularly useful for exploring the experiences of mobility and meanings of home because, as stated in the previous section, these are so personal and unique. Participants were recruited through self-storage company channels (mailing lists and staff members) as well as social media and internal adverts on Yammer. As self-storage users are often going through periods of change in their lives when renting a unit<sup>iii</sup> it was difficult to recruit participants and schedule interviews, and it took almost a year to complete the fieldwork with 33 participants. Of the three participants included in this paper, chosen on the basis of their differing experiences of mobility and moving home, two were PhD candidates whose moves were necessitated by their studies – either for fieldwork abroad (Emma, late 30s) or relocating to the city of their host institution (Claudia, mid-40s). Gill (mid-50s) and her family had originally resided in the South East of England and moved to Wales shortly before the interview. All participants could afford monthly payments on self-storage units of various sizes. It is coincidental that the participants included in this paper are all women, as the gender mix across the project participants as a whole was fairly even.

All interviews for the project were completed between January and June of 2016. They provided a way to understand participants' motivations to rent self-storage and their feelings about how this related to life events more broadly. Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of two parts. The first took place in a café, and the second in participants' self-storage units, where object elicitation was used to go into more depth around the issues identified in the first interview through individual and collective object biographies. These object-orientated second interviews combined participants 'talking with' and 'about' their possessions (see Woodward, 2016), with the significance of their placement in self-storage (see Hurdley, 2006; Miller, 2008). Claudia was the exception to this as her storage unit was in Germany, but she vividly recounted the items she had stored. Conducting object-orientated interviews in self-storage units posed unique challenges, as units were so full that participants couldn't see their items in order to recall them, and participants were reluctant to move things around and unpack boxes unless they were easily accessible. However, whilst this did change the framing of the interviews it did not mean objects were any less evocative, so narratives tended to focus on the stored objects as a whole and what their storage meant within the participants' lives more broadly.

Interview transcripts were analysed using a combination of content analysis – to deduce key themes and trends– and discourse analysis – to elicit, contemplate and scrutinise deeper meanings and implications, thereby developing the coding framework alongside analysis. Home and materiality, and changes therein, were key themes emerging from the research as a whole, and this paper focusses on the differing experiences of mobility, uncertainty and home-making narrated by the three participants.

## **Discussion**

The findings presented here show how self-storage stores objects which are required to bridge individuals between different circumstances, particularly those where futures are uncertain and/or the place of things must be negotiated.

### ***Moving home***

Gill and her family are using self-storage at a time of a significant shift in their lives: moving from their family home in the London commuter belt to a run-down farm in rural Wales. Whilst they slowly renovate the farm buildings they are storing much of their furniture and extra things in a self-storage unit in a nearby town. As well as moving their family home across the UK the move also came with a significant change in lifestyle from a career as a teacher (and her husband an accountant) to starting out as new farmers learning to care for livestock and how to run the farm. In this time of



upheaval, Gill identified their self-storage unit as being a safer place for their things than the barns and outbuildings, which were damp and unkempt. This meant that she didn't have to worry about that side of things at the moment, and could compartmentalise the various emotions and stresses in her life thereby making them more manageable.

Gill: Well just the fact it gives you peace of mind. Your stuff is safe and secure. Um... yeh I think that's it really, it's the peace of mind. Because that's the difference between having it here and having it at home. [It] is just knowing it's dry and secure and... um yeh, you haven't got to worry about it. [...] Too much change, too much going on. Yeh, this is security you know.

Despite being pragmatic about the enormous changes that brought about the need for self-storage, once confronted with her things at her unit which were boxed up and therefore not entirely visible, Gill revealed a strong emotional reaction to the point of getting visibly teary-eyed and upset.

Gill: Now I'm here actually I'm thinking 'All my stuff here!' Yeh, I'm feeling a bit 'Aw it's all my things.'

Researcher: Even though you can't see them you still feel that?

Gill: I know they are here. You know this is all it was, you know. There is a lot of stuff but every now and then you get a glimmer of something that looks familiar. And um so, like, I'll give you... Like this wardrobe is usually in the guest room, and it's always got Malcolm's suits in it. You know you can just suddenly see it in context. But it's out of context now so it gives you those feelings, those emotional connections with it and the old house, see that I've been able to compartmentalise. See, when I can shut the door to this I can forget that part of life at the moment. Because it's almost too hard to... Not too hard because it's not... But, like I say, my head is so full of what we are doing and the change and everything that's new. Um... I just haven't got the headspace to go to this really. So we're here and away from home, I suppose it just gives me a chance to go 'Oh yeh' and talk about it and think about it. I am feeling... quite a few emotions have come in... But it's alright.

Researcher: Yeh. What like missing your old place and...?

Gill: Yeh. It's all of that. It's all the emotions about... yeh... leaving it. This represents the past. This represents um... all of this bit is sort of on hold. [...] Leaving that house was really emotional... because it's the... that's the thing it's the boys' childhood and Grace's childhood all wrapped up in that house.

Gill recognised that her children had grown up in their previous home and their identities were tied up with it, as was hers. She had a lot of fond memories of her children growing up in that house, which emerged from her affective re-engagement with their household belongings. For example, upon spotting a box labelled 'DVDs' Gill proceeded to recount intimate family practices of recording and re-watching home

videos (see Rose, 2010). Seeing her things out of context reminded her that this connection was yet to be formed with their new home and that she hadn't yet had the time to process what the move had meant for her family.

Gill: I've compartmentalised all of this and it's, you know, actually in a very physical sense it has been, it's been boxed away. And it's a real metaphor for what it is. Um, it's just enabled me to know that's okay and I can deal with it another time. And actually coming here has meant that I've had to deal with it a little bit [...] but that's alright because I'll have to at some point you know! Um but as I say it's just that at the moment I don't have the headspace for it. And you know, this is no doubt what you come across, people have a different story and a different relationship with their store and everything else. And mine has been, it's out of sight, out of mind and I don't have to go there. But when I come here you suddenly think 'Oh yeh that little bit, that life did exist. It is still there'.

When her things were out of sight and she was concentrating on the work required around the house move, renovation and new lifestyle Gill had found little time to think about the magnitude of the change. As soon as she was confronted with the unit containing what she deemed to be her old life it brought up a lot of emotions (such as nostalgia and longing). Gill's self-storage unit was acting to physically and emotionally compartmentalise the old part of her life from the new, and opening it reflected back to her the changes that had occurred in her home and family life (Attfield, 2000; Parrott, 2012).

Gill: All of this is associated as I say with that family home... so everything in its way, funnily enough, has that sentiment attached to it because it's from our family home. Um, and this place will be a different place. It will be a different experience. I mean it will be a family home but you know it's another chapter and that was, this all represents a different chapter for the minute. When it becomes absorbed into the new chapter then it will feel different, but you know for the time being yeh, it represents the past. [...] No doubt it'll be exciting and wonderful and emotional and everything when we get it all home. Um yeh, it'll be that chance to again reconnect with the past, deal with that I suppose.

Arguably, our possessions are central to the (re)creation of a sense of place and the meaning of home, so when Gill and her family finally move their things into the renovated farmhouse their possessions will take on new meaning in their new home and the symbolic centre of their home will be recreated and rebuilt. For now though, their self-storage continues to hold their belongings safe from the chaos of change, bridging the old and the new, the familiar and the unknown, the past and the future.

## ***Global Nomad***

Claudia was interviewed towards the end of what she characterised as an unstable time in her life. Originally from Berlin, Claudia left in 2006 to take up a job in Afghanistan. What was meant to be a 6-month contract was extended a number of times and she ended up staying for 5 years. For the first year Claudia was in Afghanistan she kept her flat and piled up anything she hadn't taken with her in boxes in the corner of one room so that the flat could be rented out. When it became clear that the job was going to be a longer-term engagement she gave the flat up, sold most of her stuff and stored the remainder in her sister's cellar. In 2011 Claudia decided to make a change and study for a Master's degree in London. Around the same time her sister split up with her husband, so their cellar was no longer available for storage.<sup>iv</sup> At this point, Claudia had to quickly find somewhere else to store her things, so her possessions went into self-storage with the view of returning to them after the Master's year. However, instead of returning to Berlin permanently Claudia then got a short-term job in South Sudan, spent a couple of months in Berlin working on and submitting her PhD application, and went back to South Sudan for a second time, before finally moving to Cardiff to begin her PhD. Over this period each time she was in Berlin she packed and repacked her things, taking the things she needed and depositing those she didn't. Fast forward 4 years and Claudia is finishing off her thesis, looking forward to settling somewhere more permanently.

Claudia: I'm now at a point where I say I'm a bit exhausted with it. Um... It's not that I need to be at [sic] one place constantly. I don't think I would be happy with being in one place constantly, but having a base somewhere. The storage is a perfect base for when you are really doing this kind of thing back and forth and not knowing where to or what to [do next].

By packing and repacking her life and deciding what she can live with and what she can live without Claudia was constantly re-evaluating the place of her things in her life. However, what Claudia could take with her was limited by the time she would be in one place and the ease of getting things shipped over.

Claudia: It doesn't make a lot of sense to me to kind of gave [sic] the storage up and put the stuff in a huge container and ship it over to Cardiff for considerable cost only to have it here in a room which was too small for all of the stuff and for the good chance that in 6 to 9 months I would pack it up again and ship it somewhere else.

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Claudia: It is bound to practicalities. [...] Can I take something with me or is it, you know, seriously too much to bother with? Um... and what kind of space [does that have] in my head or in my mind? There are definitely things I can leave behind much easier.

Re-placing home is a difficult process involving feelings of being 'lost' that necessitates recreating familiarity and comfort through material things. Claudia talked about a favourite stuffed animal that she took everywhere because it was instrumental in making 'every bed home'. Having her stuffed animal with her was a matter of producing affective feelings of home in different spaces (see Gurney, 1997). This instance shows how home, no matter how temporary, is sometimes contingent on having one or two special objects nearby that embody feelings of comfort and constancy. However, even with her stuffed toy there, this accommodation only partly stood in for home and Claudia's feelings of at-homeness is limited to the space of her bed where the stuffed toy resides.

Claudia: There are definitely objects in my life where I would be devastated if something happens [to them] because I've lived with them for so long. To give an example, that's embarrassing, I have a stuffed animal, a stuffed pig. [...] I really love it, and I got it when I was [I] think 6 or 7. So the thing is now close to 40 years old, which is a long lifespan for a stuffed animal. [...] It was with me in Afghanistan, it was with me in South Sudan because it really makes every bed home.

Researcher: Is it with you here?

Claudia: Yes. I'd never leave that somewhere. That's coming with me.

Claudia identified that her feelings towards her self-storage unit and its contents depended to a large extent to how happy she was in her current circumstances; when unhappy she yearned for her things and the past parts of her life and settled homes they symbolised. If we understand the boundaries between self, home and away as being permeable, then moving away will also have a bearing on the make-up of home (Ahmed, 1999, p. 341). In this way, Claudia's affective experience of being away (i.e. being unhappy with her living situation in Cardiff) also affects how 'homely' she is capable of feeling (i.e. her yearning for stability or previous homes).

Claudia: I really think it's bound in a way to the living circumstances I am in. [...] When I had that horrible flat which was seriously overpriced, it was more..., it was more that I thought about where I wanted to live eventually and then I also thought about getting the stuff in a container, in a van, bringing it somewhere. And you kind of play that through your head. It was more important then.

Experiencing disjuncture in her new surroundings, Claudia sometimes yearned to be surrounded by comforting possessions; her lack of things provoking acute feelings concerning the difference between her ideal and actual situation (Parrott, 2012, p. 46). Home-making strategies are the affective and embodied response to an assessment of a place as being 'not like home', which engenders differing levels of discomfort (Butcher, 2010). However, in many ways, 'home' for Claudia is tied up in the objects in her self-storage unit more than her current flat. The things in her self-storage unit

materially constitute social and emotional relationships more than the essential items she has bought with her and therefore have a greater capacity for successful 'home-making' (see Miller, 1998).

Claudia: My flat here is at the moment very much my place because I eat there, I sleep there, I keep my stuff there. Um... the storage is a... probably more deeper [sic] way my place. Because it contains really parts of my life, of my personality probably um... which are not connected to the Cardiff life.

When Claudia first moved away it was seen only as a practical solution to her needs, but over time *"It kind of became an anchor for stuff I really want to keep"*. The unit contains possessions she can't move to her temporary accommodation (and doesn't want to) but are still important to her for various reasons (Brickell & Datta, 2011; Burrell, 2008). These items are valued for their longer-term place in her life, but moving them to the UK would require Claudia to choose to reside there more permanently and she is not set on staying long-term, so doing so would be 'uncomfortably premature' (Burrell, 2014, p. 160).

Claudia: It's basically really, kind of a ground to root in, or a kind of background kind of stuff. And that..., it sounds kind of strange because it still is kind of just storage, but that's probably the point, it's not just storage. If you are having such a fragmentalised life then it is not just storage. It is very much really about... um... the physical security to know where you are coming from.

Self-storage enables Claudia to enjoy her mobile lifestyle certain in the knowledge that the parts of her identity from before this stage in her life are secure; its value as stability has increased with her mobility. Her material roots remain behind in her self-storage unit as she travels the world, uprooted without a permanent place to call home. It is not just a storage space but representative of who she was and how far she has come (Parrott, 2012).

Claudia: I need a confirmation to know where I'm coming from because at one point life took a U-turn and brought me into kind of an incredibly different direction.

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Claudia: It's really just a place where I have parts of my life and which connects - and that probably sounds more dramatic than I really mean it - it kind of connects this first part of my life with the hopefully coming part of my life. And it builds this transition, this transitional bridge in there.

As a point of stability in a period of transition, Claudia's self-storage creates a temporal bridge between past and future. In the future, she plans to reunite with her extra stored possessions when she has a permanent job and home. The meaning of her self-

storage unit as a 'home' will then cease to be as important, and the individual significance of various dormant objects will take precedence as she moves into and attempts to make a new home.

Claudia: When I'm going to have [sic] a more stable life it might not be that important anymore and then it will probably be reduced to just objects, but at the moment it's a lot more.

When asked about the desired permanency of this next stage of her life she explained that it wasn't only its duration that mattered but its stability too, i.e. the permanency of a job. So until that stability is perceived to have been reached self-storage remains the best place for her things. Self-storage is both an additional 'root' and representation of 'home' between and across the establishment of home dwellings.

### ***Return, or not***

Emma, like Claudia, was renting a self-storage unit during a transitional part of her life. Emma moved to Africa<sup>v</sup> for research fieldwork thinking it would be for just six months but ended up being there for nearly three years. Before moving she emptied her house of belongings and put them into self-storage so she could rent out the property unfurnished. This was at the advice of the rental company who pointed out that if a tenant broke the furnishings or an appliance needed repairing she'd need to do it – obviously more difficult to arrange from Africa. Now back in the UK she still isn't ready to settle and will be keeping much of her stuff in self-storage whilst she temporarily lives in a house-share.

Before leaving for Africa Emma visited the self-storage site to speak to the staff there and have a look around to see if she was comfortable moving her stuff in. The safety and security of her things were important because it would not be easy to resolve problems from the other side of the world. As Emma was moving for an uncertain duration to an unfamiliar country with no concrete plans for her return she had a particularly strong desire to ensure the stability of the home she was leaving behind (Burrell, 2014, p. 163).

Emma: I wanted to see just how secure it was. So you know, can someone renting the self-storage unit next to me climb over the top and take what they want? [...] I wanted to make sure it was safe from the elements as well. The last things I want is to put all my stuff somewhere and for a leaky roof or something, you know. It's silly [...and] highly unlikely but you think 'If, if...'

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Emma: I was comfortable just sticking it all in there and flying off, and yeh, kind of, problem solved for me. That's the way I saw it. So it's in there, I can forget

about it now. And I did really. Other than emails to pay the bill I didn't have to worry.

From the outset self-storage allowed for Emma's uncertainty to not hold her back. She could return to her things and be assured that they would be just as she had left them. However, on her return, visiting her unit for the first time in three years Emma discovered her relationship to her things had altered considerably and she found herself questioning why she had kept so many things that she no longer felt any emotional attachment to. More than simply a question of time apart from her possessions, living in Africa had been life-changing for Emma and led to a reevaluation of what she considered to be valuable in life.

Emma: I tell you, it's changed me going over there though, changed me as a person.

Marcoux (2001, p. 83), building on Giddens (1991), recognises that moving can be a means for reflecting on one's self-narrative and is "an occasion for people to ask themselves, as he says, 'what do I want for myself?'" For Emma, viewing her things after living and working in Africa was an uncanny experience mingled with a strange sense of familiarity at having once lived with, and among, these objects. Time, distance and a changing sense of self meant that Emma could no longer identify a need for some of her things.

Emma: I kept this stuff but I could have just gotten rid of it, do you know what I mean? Like why have I got this? [She brandishes an old roll of wrapping paper]. It's wrapping paper!

Having packed in a hurry Emma's self-storage was full of odd bits and pieces which had been thrown into boxes as the need to finish packing created a rushed atmosphere fraught with indecision. So, upon re-engagement, these things are a reminder of an "inability to effectively process and manage stuff at key, life-changing moments of transition" (Horton & Kraftl, 2012, p. 40).

Emma: I guess I thought when I come back if I am moving back into that house then I'll need all this stuff again to continue living. [She laughs] But now that I've kind of moved on I'm thinking that, well, it'll probably go to another house that I'll live in, but because of my situation what's the likelihood of that happening now? This is why I'm re-evaluating what to do. [...] Like do I really need that sofa if I'm living in Africa for another three years? No. Do I need the garden furniture? No.

Now back in the UK, it is time for Emma to work out which of her things are worth holding on to. Her life choices in some ways are connected to her stored things, there to bridge her over her period away. But since she is still uncertain about what to do

and where to live next, re-evaluating her things almost seems futile. As such, self-storage can keep her things in stasis until she is ready to make the decisions on their fate and the next chapter of her life.

Self-storage holds things in abeyance for a short or a more long-term period. For most users, it is a temporary solution between previous and planned situations, such as moving from one house to another. Gill's experience of moving house involved the stress of renovating their new house and was inflected by her changing family dynamics as her children grew up and the 'family home' changed its meaning. In other instances, the move (abroad) was considerably bigger and home possessions were inflected within wider tensions and worries around disruption and mobility (Attfield, 2000, p. 154). All of the participants described a degree of uncertainty that surrounded the things they had in self-storage or events leading up to or after storing their possessions. Claudia and Emma in particular narrated stories of great upheaval and transition in their lives during which they negotiated physical and mental notions of borders, home and belonging. Self-storage didn't just store their possessions but also took on meaning as a home space where identity was rooted and secure. Just as life has been impacted by work opportunities that require moving across the world, so too the biographies of their things are disrupted through being (dis)placed in self-storage (see Hoskins, 1998; Kopytoff, 1986). What individuals take with them, and what is left behind, are important choices in experiences of mobility. Through the little they had with them Claudia and Emma attempted to engage in home-making strategies, deployed in an attempt to re-establish points of comfort, that is, to replace home. However, their 'home' was also situated materially in what was left behind in self-storage.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has identified that self-storage is used by people whilst changes unfold in their lives which have significant consequences for their experiences of mobility and ability to re-make home. Previous scholarship on the place of material culture in role transitions and adaptation to new environments has largely focused on the purchase or divestment of objects (Gentry et al., 1995; Price et al., 2000; Young, 1991), and successful house moves are often equated with lightness or fewer possessions (Gregson et al., 2007; Marcoux, 2001). This scholarship fails to acknowledge the role of storing possessions which this paper finds to also be fundamental in practices enabling people to deal with life junctures. The rich and detailed narratives in this study help to unveil the previously under-acknowledged role that (self-)storage plays in these situations.



A key finding in this paper is the role of self-storage in securing objects which resonate with memories of past identities, experiences and relationships. Stored objects which are valued for the longer-term place in participants' lives were put into self-storage to preserve them out of the way. Self-storage acted as a mooring point for participants whose moving or mobility meant that their homes were unstable, uncertain or under-negotiation. By preserving objects in stasis self-storage plays a significant role in the eventual (re)construction of the home, perhaps especially in dealing with the changes therein and related conceptualisations of self, family and belonging. Stored objects help people to come to terms with the passing of time and support the ongoing project of self.

Another key finding of this research is the role of self-storage in enabling possible futures and mobilities. Previous scholarship has argued that discarding and throwing possessions away is a way to *enable* geographical mobility (Gregson et al., 2007, p. 697). However, the findings of this research were that the use of self-storage is also an important means to secure domestic materiality in a manner that *facilitates* mobilities, both geographical (i.e. moving to a new house or moving abroad) and personal (i.e. change of career or lifestyle). Narratives in this research show that leaving possessions behind is not necessarily a choice to forget them but to hold onto them. The storage of household items in self-storage is an act of deliberate immobilisation, placing objects which are not needed 'right now' into stasis until there is felt to be enough stability or progress made towards the project of home. Self-storage enables the detachment and freedom required for a mobile lifestyle but also provides the comfort of knowing that stability does continue to exist. This paper, therefore, provides empirical confirmation of theoretical accounts that have suggested the importance of stillness in experiences of mobility (see Bissell, 2008; Cresswell, 2012).

Finally, the findings in this paper illustrate that uncertainty plays a significant role throughout the practices of self-storage use, with the ability and ease of making decisions of whether to keep or divestment of objects contingent upon the circumstances at the time. Under various circumstances, participants chose to store objects in self-storage when the rationality of their decisions was clouded with emotions. This extended to mundane 'junk' as much as it did to sentimental items. Findings from this research also point towards the role of self-storage in not letting uncertainty constrain participants' actions in other parts of their lives.

This paper is a vital and timely contribution, which indicates the need to acknowledge different experiences of home-making and mobility in the contexts of precarity and uncertainty. Focusing on the phenomenon of self-storage use shows that indecision is common-place in moments of change but can be accommodated through new geographies of storage solutions that exist beyond, but still inextricably connected to,

the domestic sphere. We live in a society where indecision is inevitable due to the rise in precarious living and working arrangements and less predictable life courses (Bauman, 2000). Overall, this research has revealed that self-storage caters to a need to find stability during different experiences of mobile domesticities, and indicates the importance of storage spaces and practices in evolving relationships between people, things, and home.

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- <sup>i</sup> 'Biographical objects' – enlivened by the memories and emotions endowed upon them – transgress the perceivable physical boundaries between persons and their things and show that possessions can go a long way to becoming surrogate selves (Appadurai, 1986; Hoskins, 1998; Kopytoff, 1986). Things, therefore, stand in for the self thereby making it solid and knowable.
- <sup>ii</sup> Equally, whilst housing can at first glance appear a sedentarist object of study, housing researchers have a long-standing tradition of wrestling with this dichotomy, and engaging with the mobilities turn has been part of this work (for discussion see Dufty-Jones, 2012, p. 210-213).
- <sup>iii</sup> Other participants in the study were renovating properties, down-sizing, storing items for their children (Owen and Boyer 2019), belonging to deceased relatives (Owen forthcoming), or following a divorce. However, some simply did not have enough space for their possessions at home or used their self-storage unit as an extension to their home space.
- <sup>iv</sup> Renting a self-storage unit, unlike storing possessions in a sister's cellar or parent's loft, gives users total ownership and autonomy over their things, where there is no burden on loved ones or requirement to negotiate access (Owen and Boyer 2019).
- <sup>v</sup> Emma only ever referred to her fieldwork location as Africa, rather than a particular country/ies.