

Moving the Material Me: A Visual Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

This visual autoethnography aims to understand how the significant event of moving house forces us to consider the materiality of our lives and the intimate relationships we have with our belongings. Situated at the intersection of anthropological studies on the home and materiality, this study looks at the ways these fields interact to reveal new conceptions of responsibility over the social life of things. Using autoethnographic methods, this research is embedded in my personal embodied experience of moving house, with particular emphasis on the sensory and subjective elements of this process, as highlighted through photographs and descriptive vignettes. This study delves into the decisions behind whether we keep, throw away, or pass on our things, interwoven with discussions around our moral obligations to the material lifeworlds of our stuff. It explores how our possessions reflect our relationships, our heritage, and ourselves.

Keywords: material culture; moving house; home; decluttering; visual ethnography; sensory ethnography

This visual autoethnography aims to understand how the significant event of moving house forces us to consider the materiality of our lives and “unpack” the intimate relationships we have with our belongings. Emerging from the 90 day notice I received to move out of the house I had been living in with my family for the last 5 years, the field site for this ethnography took shape. Within this exploration, I consider interrelated questions surrounding decision making and the factors that shape our choices of whether to keep, sell, throw out, donate, or give away items, and our responsibility once they are no longer ours. This invites us to discuss the social life of things, their value to us and the market, where they have come from, and where they will go; the “passing on” of things. Threaded through these discussions is an investigation into the materiality of memory as stored in our belongings, and what it means to give up memory, or cut ties when discarding our things. Situated at the intersection of established anthropological subjects of the home, materiality, and waste, this research examines how these fields interact with the process of moving to reveal new conceptions of responsibility over the social life of things. By looking at the materiality of our intimate lives I demonstrate how we can better understand each other and ourselves through the objects with which we furnish our lives.

I structured this visual autoethnography with the intention of taking you along the moving process with me, while also highlighting elements of material culture. The juxtaposition of diverse objects, rendered into words and pictures, evokes the haphazard material encounters that emerge through the systematic process of packing up a home. At the start of the moving process there is the time and energy for glorious indulgence in the profusion of material memories, childhood toys, boxed away photos, and half-finished art projects. To revel in the remembering, moseying your way through, unpacking and repacking the same old things that are relocated from house to house. Then, getting into the groove of it, you start the decluttering, determined to shrink the size of your possessions that all of a sudden seem quite overwhelming. You start to consider the contents of your pantry like you never have



All You Need is Less

I found this at my local op shop (thrift store) when dropping off some things I had decluttered, and appreciated the perfect irony of it. In the context of the op shop, in and amongst all the things that people have gotten rid of in an attempt to have less, this made me stop in my tracks and laugh.

before, and the enormity of the waste you have produced becomes increasingly apparent. But with all your possessions stripped back and boxed up, you come to consider the traces of yourself and your belongings, proof of your material impact on this space, and how it feels to remove the evidence of your existence or leave reminders for those to come. I shift then to the final days of moving. To the ways humour and exhaustion are communicated in how we care for our things. From wrapping prized possessions with the utmost care, to jamming things together in boxes and calling it a day. To focus on the joy material objects can bring, and the enormous pain of having to move them all. In closing I reflect on the emotional toll that moving takes and how in reconnecting with our things, in the process of physically moving them, we come to situate our sense of home in our things, and the memories they hold, transporting them from one house to the next.



Still Life

Taking this photo, I realised that the deep connections I have to this pile of items cannot be translated simply through the visual. This "Still Life," in my eyes, has so much movement, it is buzzing with memories. As if I am playing "I Spy," I can hunt through the image, and I find a Madeline picnic set, two iron fairies, a wind-up music box, a Pinkies Triathlon medal, a butterfly, a tin of crayons, Silver Linings Playbook, and a little jar of glitter. But when these things end up on op shop shelves does my connection with them, or their connection with me, cease? Their new owners will not know where they have come from or their story. I think, could I attach a note to each of the objects, explaining their life before? But will the new owner even care?



With Love, Grandmother

I was always envious of my grandmother's ability to paint. Every birthday, every Christmas, a watercolour artwork, inscribed (usually on the back) with a letter of love. This example is far from her best work, but I always marvelled at how she could use the light and shadow. She passed away when I was in primary school, so I was never able to learn properly from her. There are some photos somewhere of me in her studio at the easel, paintbrush in my chubby toddler hand, beaming up at the camera, her by my side. So, I keep all these cards, little pocket size artworks, read the messages about nothing in particular, and cherish the memories.

A Container of Friends

Bella, Rosie, Wiggly Woo, Tigger, and Flat Nose Bear. Some worn around the edges, showing signs of the lifetimes they've lived. Others pristine, never to be played with.

Friends... containing memories, of a younger version of me.

I can't bear the thought of them in the hands of grubby kids, or sitting atop shop shelves, longing for a hug.

Their eyes full of life... as if they have stories of their own to tell.

And so they stay, squished together tightly, crammed into a plastic home, stored away and forgotten, until next time.



Haunted

This shirt has haunted me. Not in a ghostly sort of way, in more of a decision-making dilemma way. I just could not decide what to do with it. The colour I would never wear, and it is made of this silky sports-like material in a polo style. I was given it at a leadership camp I went to in January 2019. This camp was an amazing experience, and had a huge impact on me in relation to what I am passionate about, but we wore the shirt only twice that week, and now what am I meant to do with it? Arriving at a stalemate, I've kept it. I can already foresee its future, where it sits in the back of my wardrobe and taunts me every time I sort through my clothes.



A large part of the moving process is recovering long-lost treasures amongst stored belongings and indulging in the nostalgia of sparked memories. Macdonald and Morgan's concept of "curating profusion" (2016, 1) can be best applied to this stage of moving, that in sorting through our belongings we are making choices about what we seek to represent ourselves through, and how this showcases our heritage. When I look at my treasured items, their significance to me is influenced by their relationality to other people, through familial connections and the obligation I feel to hold onto things to maintain those relationships. Over the years I have taken on the responsibility as the keeper of various family members' childhood toys. 'A container of friends' captures some of my precious stuffed animals, as well as my mum's bear, and my cousin's doll. As a child I had a hierarchy of toys: my favourites got played with most, while those that had come from other homes were always neglected or cast as the villains in my play. Now as a young adult I feel the weight of this commitment to hold onto the once treasured friends of my family, even if I do not have a particular connection to the objects themselves. But my toys on the other hand, I could not bear to part with. Winnicott's (1971) writing on transitional objects as the first "not me" object that a child is encouraged to form an attachment to, in place of constant attention from a parent, explains the deep bonds we often form to our childhood toys (Chin 2016, 42). In her autoethnographic book, Chin (2016) writes that from very early on we ritually encourage children to put their trust in objects rather than people. The transitional object is not simply for self-soothing purposes but becomes encoded in a relationship of trust, reliance, and dependency. While the initial need for the soothing property of the object may diminish over one's childhood, this relationship built on memories and emotional reliance lingers. Chin (2016, 40) recounts losing her own beloved "Banky" at a friend's house, and while she was devastated, there was an underlying feeling of relief that she didn't have to be responsible for saying goodbye or throwing away her toy. It is this sense of responsibility forged through a connection formed in the early stages of our development that makes

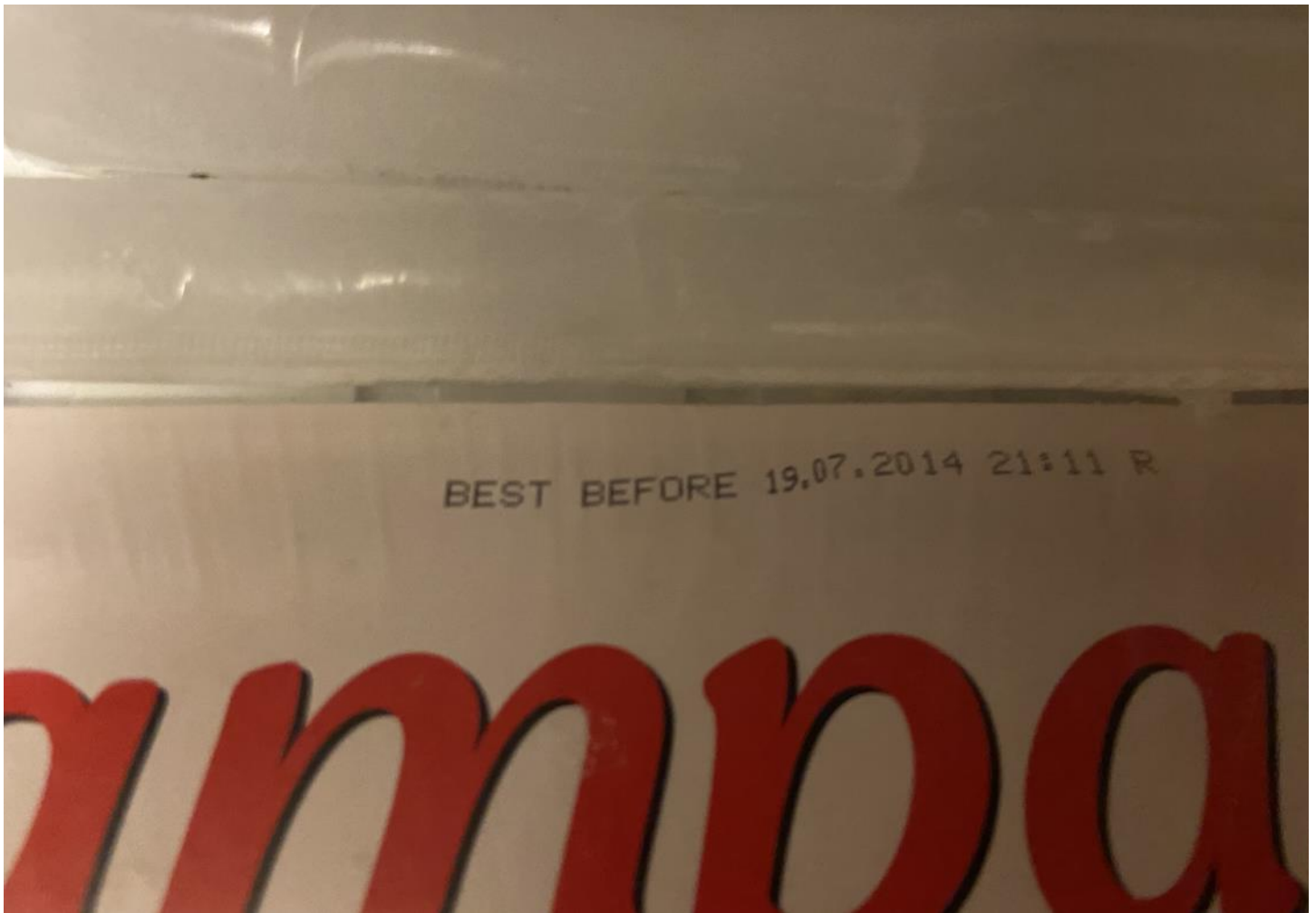
parting from these transition objects so tough. Rather than unpacking my emotional connection to my childhood toys, and the underlying sense of cultural embarrassment (that I like to pretend I don't feel) that surrounds having stuffed animals as an adult, I decided it was simply too hard, boxed them back up, and made them a problem for future me.

This responsibility for heritage was also evident when sorting through the family photos, in particular my parent's wedding album. Despite being divorced from my dad for a couple of years now, my mum stated that she would be keeping the wedding photos for my brother and me. Her reasoning was that it was important for us as their children to have some memories of them happy together. By displacing the responsibility onto us, she was able to disconnect from the emotional potency of her memories, both loving and painful, invoked through the ownership of the images, but retain a sense of comfort in the fact that the material evidence of the family history is safe and will be remembered. Miller and Parrott (2009) highlight the tendency to preserve only the ideal versions of people or relationships in the keeping of objects. In contrast to, say, piles of divorce paperwork, wedding photos allow for a representation of the relationship at its prime, refracted through gendered roles and societal milestones.

I felt this obligation to others, implanted in their material possessions, especially in relation to those that had died. My responsibility was not only to my heritage, but to theirs as well. Thus, letting go of things would mean letting go of those connections, and forgetting those memories. Giacomelli (2020) explores the diversity of approaches to keeping our memories of people alive through their things. Discussing her treasured items, one of Giacomelli's research participants, Franca, explained that she chose to store away a blanket her mother gave her on her wedding day rather than to use it, because if she ruined it, it would tarnish those memories (2020, 201). By protecting the blanket, the memories contained within it are also protected. In contrast, Claudia, whose father died when she was young, uses his possessions every day, or

has them on display around her home, bringing the dead into the present (Giacomelli 2020, 201). Similarly, Miller and Parrott (2009) explore the capacity for objects once owned by those who have died to be both a painful reminder of their loss, and a means to manage that loss. They emphasise that divestment can be a powerful tool to regain control over one's emotions towards the death of a loved one. Although we cannot control death itself, we can choose how that person is represented through their belongings and offer a new life to their things.

Belongings therefore symbolise interpersonal relationships, and as Woodward (2021) suggests, in her ethnographic study on clutter in the home, are a way people negotiate and manage their social relationships. Woodward (2021) also proposes the values we attach to our things are not only situated in their inherent thingness, or their material qualities, but the relationships they represent. She provides the example of a mother keeping the drawings of her young child, not because of the quality of the drawings themselves but because of the moral expectations surrounding the exchange (Woodward 2021, 11). In this instance the mother is operating through normative ideas of the appropriate material trajectory of artworks, doing what she feels a good parent is supposed to do, and in keeping the drawings she is showing her child that their work, and familial connection, is valued (Woodward 2021, 11). This experience is one I could relate to in the conversations I had with my own mother when sorting through the paintings I had done as a child. Since she took on the gendered role of the stay-at-home mum, in charge of homemaking and thus the possessions in the house, she was under additional pressure not only to be a good parent, but a good mother specifically. Putting aside the very best, she had curated a gallery of my images, and kept them, so that in my adulthood I could decide what to do with them. This choice was influenced by her lack of possessions from own her childhood, and the desire to give me the option to keep the paintings, whether I would want to or not. Her reasoning being that if she threw them away, I would feel the same resentment she had felt towards her own mother, and she would be seen as a negligent parent. This



decision to keep a multitude of artworks, bound in moral expectations of mothering, is therefore materially representative of a valued parent-child connection.

Scholarship on both homemaking and attachments to the material world situates them as traditionally feminised practices, so it is understandable that the responsibility typically falls on women to see the affective links and memorable relationships in the material, and to perpetuate that exchange from generation to generation (Giacomelli 2020; Pink 2003). In my experience of moving, my younger brother, while no longer living with us, contributed minimally to discussions around what to keep or donate from his own belongings. Despite saying he didn't care, his blind trust in myself and my mum indicates his reliance on our judgement as to what should and should not be important to him. This responsibility of both the labour itself and the curation of memory was a heavy one to bear.

Best before 19.07.2014

These pastry sheets had become part of the landscape of the freezer; you always expected to see them and looked past them to find what you were actually after. The funny part is that we moved into that house around 2015, so these were already out of date when we took the effort to move them. This cleaning out process forced the familiar to become strange, and for me to notice these things as I hadn't before.

It Still Works

These are some of the medical creams, sprays, pills, and potions that we binned while cleaning out the medicine boxes. It isn't captured in the photo, but this process was really genuinely funny. Delirious after a day of sorting through things, Mum and I laughed the entire time at the odd products we had, most of which were out of date by a good couple of years. The nappy rash cream, (which, as she reminded me, "can be used for more than just nappy rash you know") was still in the medicine box, despite me being 21 and my brother 18. Some cold and flu

medicine had only a couple of months until it expired, and it was kept with the verbal warning, "now if you're going to get sick, you have to do it before July or this will go to waste." The "it still works" mentality is what had kept most of these in the medicine boxes, that they still probably did the job, alongside the fact that we were too lazy to clean them out — mostly because everything in the containers was usually coated in a sticky golden yellowish substance from something that had leaked long ago.



Where do we go from here?

This is a closer look at some of the things in our council pick-up pile. The yoga mats almost peek in the side of the image to ask, "Where are we going? What is happening to us?" And I know that's just my perception of the image, with a sort of artistic reflection, when really it is just some mats, a drum, pillows, a fake plant, and a stack of tires. But whether or not the material objects are asking themselves "where do we go from here," I am asking the question. What is the afterlife of these things? They will likely end up at the tip, consuming a space on this earth, buried, unable to break down, just sitting in junkyards. The thought of that makes me feel sick. That there are just huge spaces dedicated to waste. And the reality of what happens to our stuff when we are done with it is revived in my social conscious. To make more thoughtful purchases, to reuse, to regift, to recycle.

While I have focused on objects of significance and the things I held onto, much of this study was also consumed by an extensive decluttering. The moving process and moving mindset disrupted the everyday landscape of my life, and made the familiar strange once again (Ehn, Löfgren, and Wilk 2015). I was constantly filled with the sense that we had so much stuff, and the worry about how were we possibly going to sort through and move it all. I had to consciously remind myself to "zoom in" or "zoom out:" when the task felt too huge, to just focus on one thing at a time, and when I got caught up on individual things, to look at the bigger scope of moving and simply get on with things. I was tormented by the freedom of decluttering, and employed the popularised Marie Kondo (2014, 44) method of considering whether things "spark joy" in deciding whether to keep them. This getting rid of things did make me feel lighter, as Woodward (2021) indicates many studies say you should feel, with less material baggage holding me back. However, I also felt overwhelmed by the social lives of things while they were in my possession and their future material afterlives when they were beyond my sphere of influence. We have a set of social expectations around the trajectory



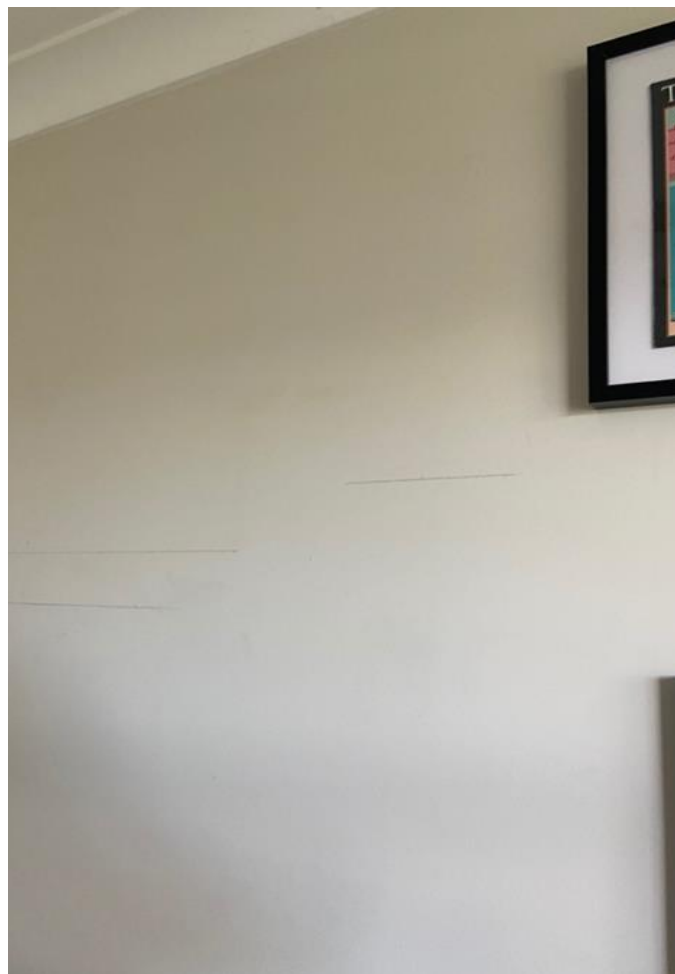
of things, clutter being a phase in this lifecycle, such that we simply cannot consume and discard objects, even if we don't want them (Woodward 2021). It is the thingness, the innate material quality of objects that prevails even after their value has gone, and that allows them to remain a site of creative and transformational potential (Woodward 2021, 11).

This led me to consider my sense of responsibility over the social life of my things and their material afterlives when I gave them away or threw them out. The difficulty when curating profusion, or a large quantity of something, is that it becomes exhausting, and when the lifeworlds of the things we own are more about use-value than memory or connection to self or others, we find them easier to discard (de Wolff 2018; Macdonald and Morgan 2016). The choices we make when disposing of our objects heavily impact their

material afterlives. It was in reading de Wolff's (2018) writing on materiality and the ecologies of discarded objects that the weight of these decisions became clear. Focusing on Kamilo Beach in Hawaii where fragments of discarded plastics wash ashore, de Wolff (2018, 1) frames objects not as bounded entities but as material processes with no endpoint. As I have already outlined, we think of our objects as carriers of meaning, as representations of us, but when they are discarded and break into fragments of material washing up into faraway places, how does this change? When the synthetic materials leach pollutants into the oceans and become homes for sea life, shaping and being shaped by their new environments, they retain cultural traces of us (de Wolff 2018, 1). In my conscious choice to discard I relinquished the control I had over the lives of my things, handing them over to the unknowns of our recycling systems, op shops, and dumps, unable to definitively secure a future free of their potential environmental harm.

Reflecting on de Wolff's (2018) first-hand experiences with the ecological problems of consumer waste, I tried as best I could to ensure the best outcomes for my things by recycling, donating, or rehoming, but the exhaustion of going through a home full of objects led to quick decision-making, which usually ended up with things in the trash. This provoked feelings of guilt about the impact of my life on the planet. Thomas et al. (2017) emphasise that our relationship to waste changes over our life course as new definitions of waste emerge from our social relationships, innovation, and the value of things, but I also posit that our relationship to waste changes generationally. I am privileged in my worry for the planet, in my curation of excess within a capitalist system that demands the infinite collection of more, and my subsequent responsibility to sort and discard from my collection. I have the luxury of plenty, and the luxury to put it out of my mind. With the urgent need to tackle overproduction, excessive consumption of energy, and thus climate change weighing on the shoulders of the young, individuals are feeling increasing pressure to make big changes to their lives while the companies that produce this excess sit back and do nothing. Should I be worried at all then,

if my personal actions are not going to make a difference? While I did contemplate these questions, I also found myself having to put them out of my mind in order to get on with packing. I had to bring myself back to the reality of my present life rather than its future impact.



Remnants

If you look closely to this photo you can see the pencil lines I drew on the wall when hanging my framed art work in order to ensure they were straight. When taking the pictures down off the walls I had to painstakingly rub away these lines. They were the only traces left that I had had an impact on this house, that my things were there making marks, that I was there. After I finished, my arm was cramped and my fingers tight, the floor covered in little rubber shavings.



Long Forgotten

I took this photo while cleaning out the fan in the bathroom, which was normally covered by a vent. It was really dusty and gross, and while I cleared away most of it with the vacuum, I didn't make sure that it was spotless, as it's mostly tucked away. Now, reflecting on this, I am kind of happy thinking about the fact that some of our dead skin cells mixed with dust are still in the house, hidden, proof that we were once there when all other evidence has been wiped away.

The moving process also becomes in a sense an undoing process. By packing up the material things that fill out the space of a home you are removing yourself from this landscape. Although home culture scholars such as Cieraad (2010) highlight the importance of material objects in the making of a home, in transforming spaces, and in representing transitions, I emphasise that the process of putting them there and subsequently taking them away is a part of unmaking home. The repetitive action of scrubbing the walls or wiping down vents became an extension of this. Beyond the removal of my material belongings, I also had to remove any traces of my material form, such as stray hairs on the floor, dust atop the fan, or dirty fingerprints on door handles, that would identify a relationship between us and the house. In packing up the objects that decorated our home, and scrubbing its surfaces, we were transforming it back into a house, a blank slate that no longer had a material connection to us. This was a deeply emotional process, but in the same instance it allowed a severing of the tie between myself and what I had known as home.

The concept of home is fluid, both actively being instated and connected to past conceptions of its enactment. This became particularly evident on moving day, as we experienced an almost tangible discomfort in labelling the two houses. We were going from "home" to the "new house", then when that didn't feel right it was from the "old house" to the "new house", or from the name of one suburb to the name of another. In the undoing of home, the word felt uncomfortable in my mouth. Saying it aloud in relation to the conversation felt wrong, like a grammatical error, but there was nothing adequate to replace it. It was in those moments I felt a loss, in the leaving of one home without the conception of another.

Texture

This is a close-up of some boots Mum decided to give away. This photo was originally taken to post on Facebook marketplace to show people the fabric. I like the vibrancy of the image, and that you want to reach out and stroke the photo to feel the scales. This serves as my appreciation of the rich vibrancy and texture of our belongings, that they aren't all wrapped up in memories, feelings of guilt, or utility, that they, in their material form, have qualities of beauty.

The process of autoethnography, in examining the seemingly unimportant elements of everyday life, is uniquely suited to my topic of exploration, as the moving process itself invites an exploration into the background material elements of our lives that we rarely stop to consider. Pink's (2003, 46) approach to the "sensory home" is one I adopted during my research and in my choice of visual ethnographic method. Considering the home as a sensory landscape influences how we look at our material lives, and encourages particular emphasis on each item's texture, material, weight, odour, visual qualities, and taste (if you are brave enough to lick it) as well as how it makes you feel (Pink 2003). Not only did I consider the sensory nature of my belongings, but also the sensory nature of the moving process. Repetitively wrapping wine glasses in newspapers, the inky scent tickling at my nostrils, I found my fingers coated in a dusty black film, which I wiped lazily on the side of the



rough cardboard box I placed the glasses in. Holding the tape dispenser to the side of the box, it screeched as I pulled it taut in the air then flat down against the box, and tore it off on the other side before running my hand across the smooth plastic tape to seal it down. This sensory exploration I believe is best captured through a multimodal ethnography, one that incorporates photos as well as poetic captions alongside thick description and academic analysis. Thus, in order to capture the process of moving house holistically, several manners of perceiving need to be employed. This desire to both experience and capture the sensory qualities of the move is reflected in my note-taking practices. I would let myself get caught up in the nostalgia of memory boxes diving deep into another world, careful to hold onto the feelings evoked but not to wrench myself out of the dream-like state. I would write notes on my phone, or on whatever piece of paper was closest, consisting of one to two-word phrases like “book fair,” “Lego,” “awards folder,” and “glow-in-the-dark stars,” which I would come back to later. I used photos in the same way, taking a quick photo so I would remember to write about it later that day.

Although I had not intended for this to become a visual ethnography, it emerged out of this sporadic photo-taking throughout my fieldwork. As Pink (2007, 66) states, it is important to understand the context within which our knowledge of photography has developed, as well as how our photos fit within the visual culture of our study. I do not consider myself a photographer in the traditional sense, but I document my life as many of us do, using the camera on my phone. These photos were taken on my iPhone 11 with no editing, and while I may have framed shots to make the object more or less dominant in the photo, or moved positions to gain better light, most of the time I snapped the photo and moved on to packing. I was also taking photos of my belongings anyway, in order to assist the passing on of things in secondhanded economies, whether through Facebook Marketplace listings or messages sent directly to friends to see if they wanted what I was getting rid of. The use of Facebook Marketplace both bolstered my visual ethnographic approach by encouraging me to take photos of

things to sell, but also opened a new avenue for material investigation, as it bridged a gap between myself and the people to whom I sold my possessions, a connection which is not possible when donating to op shops. Taking photos of my things, whether I was passing them on or keeping them, allowed for a preservation of connection through a transformation from the material to the digital, extending their life, in photographic form, regardless of what happened to their material body.

Capturing the intensely sensory elements of this material study, these photos and their accompanying captions became visual vignettes centred on their subject’s significance and took on a far larger role than I had initially anticipated. I had started off taking photos as a reference and by the end of the move I had 202 photos to sift through. As I got into the practice, I become more concerned with the composition of the image, choosing to zoom out to capture the whole object and its context, or to zoom in and focus on its textural qualities. Half of the photos were taken from adult height, hovering over the object in a boxing up state. Most often objects were housed in some sort of container which itself came into focus, such as a cardboard moving box, a plastic tub, washing basket or garbage bag, which showcased the transitory nature of the photographic subjects. Photos of the house or its features are quite different; they look out or up, capturing a feature of a room, but never the whole thing in its context. I found that capturing the house as a whole, when it was empty, seemed almost a waste. Without my things in the home, in their context, there was less to be said, the stories were boxed up and on their way, and there was no use in capturing the ghosts of where they had been.

It was important to me to embed the photos in the descriptions and analysis of the ethnography, rather than have a separate visual album, as that is how my thinking worked throughout the research process. I was simultaneously packing, taking photos, and contemplating the impact of my actions in relation to what I had been reading; it all melded together. I purposely did not include myself in the photos, positioning my

possessions as the subject, as I wanted them to be able to stand alone and tell their own story, so the viewer/reader could consider their visual qualities first, before being introduced to my connection with them. I used captions to bridge the gap between the photos and my analysis of them, by introducing my emotional connection to the objects. This format allowed for poetic, diary like confessions, where I could communicate my internal dialogue and speak directly to the reader, as if I were beside them, showing them a window into my life. I wrote these captions and vignettes after moving, in a reflective process, rather than during. I sat down to review my collection of photos and picked out the ones that had something to say, and then wrote down what that was. Some of these vignettes describe what I felt after moving, reflecting on the things that are now long gone out of my life, and others captured the thoughts I had in that moment that were still simmering away in the back of my head.

While the democratisation of photography to the ordinary person through their smartphone may have demystified the wonder of more traditional visual ethnography, I find beauty in the “not-trying” of these photos. The experience of moving is a near universal one, so I wanted this ethnography to be accessible beyond a scholarly audience. The inclusion of visuals through the photos assists in embedding this research in the reality of the experience, in the mundaneness of the home and the everyday. Therefore, because I was not setting out with the intention to capture an ethnographic feel through visual images, I believe that I ended up with a far better impression of the materiality of my life, than if I had purposely tried to capture this.



Snug as a bug

I was really struggling to work out how I was going to move all of my houseplants, as many of them grow in water in glass jars. I love my plants, and wanted to ensure they all survived the trip, but, how on earth are you meant to move plants?! You can't just put them in a box, or carry them on your lap in the car, not when you have this many at least. This photo shows the solution I ended up at, with them all tucked into boxes with tea towels wrapped tightly around them, ready for the journey to their new home, snug as a bug in a rug.

Space optimisation

This photo makes me laugh every time I see it. We put the toaster in the microwave to save space when moving, that's it, that's all this is, there isn't a deep message behind it. I don't know how Mum got the idea that this would be a smart thing to do, but we both enjoyed it. On moving day, when unpacking the new kitchen to heat up my lunch, I giggled when I opened the microwave and saw the toaster. It brought some light and laughter to the day.



While moving is often planned, the reality for people that rent, like me, is that we are often forced to move at the end of our lease, or when circumstances change unexpectedly. Thus,

planning a research project around moving house is contingent on a transient field site. The temporality of the field lends itself to an autoethnographic approach, where one operates both as researcher and participant in the events of their own life. The findings of this study are specific, however, to the circumstances under which I moved, which was not by choice, but necessity, in a poor rental market where the demand for homes was outnumbering available properties, when we had to downsize again, yet for a higher price. We also moved ourselves with the help of partners and close friends, instead of hiring movers, due to the cost of labour. These contextual factors undoubtedly impacted how I experienced this process, and this study would have been vastly different if the move had been under different circumstances. The realities of the broader social world impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic meant that this research was also bound by the changing restrictions to human research, as a deep ethnographic study in another person's house simply would not have been feasible.

My moving narrative is just one among many. Although we had to downsize this was not to the extent that Stevens, Camic, and Solway (2019) discuss in their research on the elderly moving into residential care homes. Participants in their study describe this particular moving experience as a process of unpicking, whereby in sorting and departing with the items that once formed the landscape of their home they are forced to discard layers of themselves (Stevens, Camic, and Solway 2019, 219). Uncertainty around the future of their possessions poses a key threat to identity during this transition, however, by being involved in this process, rather than it being done for them, they are able to curate their new space, providing a continuity of identity, and safeguard items of importance (Stevens, Camic, and Solway 2019, 217). Moving can also be a milestone event, as captured by Cieraad (2010) in her research on Dutch university students as they move into their college dorms. As this is the first step out of the family home, students utilise their homemaking as a means to shape and embody a new social identity of independence and self-reliance (Cieraad 2010, 88). These moving experiences are different

again from that of a refugee, to first homebuyers moving into their own place, or a child moving between foster carers. My experience of moving is thus very insular to my circumstances; however, the process of questioning my material relationships is one that resonates with many.

One of the most revealing parts of this research and using an autoethnographic approach was in its inescapable all-consumingness. As the field site was made up of my literal home, objects, and emotional journey, there was no separation between what was my research and what was my life. Even when I wanted to stop packing and moving, or even thinking about packing and moving, I could not, because it was happening anyway. I did attempt to employ Chang's (2008, 43) recommendations for best practice autoethnography and straddle the emic and the etic, considering each moment both as the subjective insider and balancing it with objective reason. I also tried to home in on the experiences I shared with my family, rather than solely on my own experiences, but at the end of the day I could not help but mull over my own thoughts. While this was often draining and left me feeling like I was overanalysing everything I got rid of or chose to keep, this intense immersion in the field was necessary, as Pink (2003) emphasises, to capture embodied experience, and was ultimately of enormous benefit to the depth of understanding I was able to achieve. The process of ethnographic research in parallel with moving house allowed me to systematically separate from that home both physically and emotionally. In addition, I strengthened my familial connections by achieving a deeper awareness of their material worlds and the objects that tied us to one another. I am still unsure whether this is due to the moving experience or the ethnographic process, or both hand in hand, as together we peeled back the layers of clutter and opened ourselves up to a new way of viewing the material landscape of the everyday. If nothing else, this autoethnographic approach was a hugely cathartic experience, in that by having to process and understand the emotions that were evoked around this significant life event, I was able to better understand myself and my relationship to my belongings.

Just a house

While I took photos of the rest of the house empty before we left, I kept forgetting to take a photo of the front of it, maybe because in doing that it would seem final, like the closing scene of a movie. A couple of weeks after we had moved, Mum was there to pick up some mail and took a photo of the front of it, as per my request. The gloomy weather aids this feeling, but it seems cold and empty, with everything packed up and moved on, all traces of us wiped from the walls, with the blinds still pulled shut. This home is just a house once more.



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