

Sentimental Objects and Their Effect on International Students' Creation of Home While Abroad

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Abstract

The sentimental objects international students bring from home play a role in their orientation of personal space by helping to create a home away from home. Through examining relationships between international students and their objects from childhood, traveling, or gained through important life events, the author provides insight into how people claim space and how such objects alter space. The objects itself has a specific meaning which is assigned by the owner and in turn projects its meaning to the space around it. When the owner leaves to go abroad, in this case to study, it seems it was crucial for the owner to bring their objects with them not only out of necessity such as clothes, toothbrush and so on, but also out of personal attachment as with a teddy bear, a necklace and so on. Once these objects are in their new space, the owner then appears to feel more at home within a previously unknown space. Without the objects being there with the international student, the meaning they hold is not transcended. In order to create a home abroad, international students use their objects as a source of personal meaning and such meaning is projected onto the space around them in order to claim the space as theirs as well as create a temporary home. Using anthropological theory to outline and explicate this process of bringing sentimental objects from home to create a temporary home while abroad, the author pieces together a story of home told through the objects international students just cannot leave behind when traveling abroad.

1. Introduction

What comes to mind when thinking of the term “home”? Is it a city, or maybe a certain house? As we grow throughout life a physical “home” can change over and over again, but its significance within our lives remains the same. It’s the place where we sleep, where we can relax, where we can be ourselves, and it’s always a part of who we are so when “home” is abruptly changed, how do we make a new one? How do we keep our identity if the place where we can be ourselves has changed? Through interviewing and observing people who recently went through a sudden change in what they call home, specifically international students studying abroad, I hoped to answer these questions. My findings combined with that of several ethnographies and anthropological studies reveal the many ways in which people persevere their home identities and make a new home while abroad.

While studying at the University of Sussex in Brighton, England in autumn of 2016, I made friends from all over the world. When they invited me to their houses and rooms, I noticed souvenirs from their home countries. Everything from teddy bears to photo albums were meticulously placed around their rooms prompting me to consider how my international friends’ home identities mixed with their new English identities. While living abroad, in a new country with new people and a new room with nothing recognizable in it, it seems that someone would need a little piece of home with them and find space for that piece in their already-jam packed suitcase. When I asked my friends why they brought it, the usual response was that they would feel empty without it; they would not feel at home.

This fascination with sentimental objects creating a sense of comfort within an individual prompted me to consult my earlier project completed in my ethnographic methods class on how objects create a sense of personal space. In

this study, I conducted observations of people within a café and noticed how items like laptops, headphones, books, and so on create a personal bubble within public space. People appear closed off to others in the public sphere by having an object as their primary focus of attention opposed to appearing open and not busy with an object and thus create a sense of separation between the person who has the object and the person who does not. The one who has something to do uses the object to create a personal space zone in the larger context of the public zone by appearing occupied thus creating an unwritten rule that people should not enter the zone of private space created within the larger public space.

In my present research with international students it became clear that there is a transition from thinking an object is just a thing, to “the expression ‘the life of things’ ...how inanimate objects can have an autonomous life, how they can move, feel, or even think and act¹”. After talking to my friends, and studying the scholarship on objects, attachment, identity, and personal space, I started to piece together this phenomenon and discovered that through assigning meaning to otherwise inanimate objects, people create a social being within the object and thus a personal attachment. If the object has a personality within it assigned by the owner, then the object is no longer just a teddy bear for example, it becomes a teddy bear with a name, a personality, and an event associated with it to evoke a given emotion in the owner. When people are creating a new home, these objects are essential for feeling truly at home because they not only create a separation between private space and public space, but also have the power to make that personal space have emotional meaning.

As I interviewed my friends, it became clear that each object each friend brought was specifically relevant to creating a home because it created a particular kind of personal space. By inserting emotional significance into a private space, international students are creating spaces that are homes opposed to just plain private space. Each object held emotional attachment and shaped the room in which it was placed once unpacked, thus the interaction of personal space and sentimental objects then became my primary focus of this project.

Organized into different sections with case studies of students’ situations at their new home abroad, I argue that sentimental objects are essential to claiming space and making that space home. Through assigning meaning to given objects, international students feel attachment to these objects and thus feel the need to bring them with them over thousands of miles to their new temporary home. Each student in the following sections has his or her own objects with their own personal significance and uses such significance in ways that are specific to the student. Through interviewing the students, analyzing their responses through the prism of anthropological studies and ethnographies, and piecing them together, I seek to explicate stories of international students creating home abroad.

1.1 The Sample

I studied 10 students, 4 males, and 6 females. Their nationalities ranged from Australian to Canadian to Danish. All of us were studying at the University of Sussex in Brighton, England. Each of us lived off campus in flats located in various places throughout the city. Most of us had our own bedrooms with the exception of one who lived in a sectioned off area of a living room within a larger flat. I did not ask directly about income or race as I felt that was not necessary to my thesis, but it would be informative to look at the relationship between which objects were present based on race or income. Although I did pay attention to gender in the sense that I sampled both genders, I did not find it indicative of any vast differences between the findings at the end of my study. Though it would be interesting to analyze the differences in genders, I chose to focus on the objects in relation to the owner as an individual international student, and focus on the issues that arise strictly within being as such.

2. Methods

I chose to focus on interviews and personal accounts for this project. After sitting down and, with students’ permission, recording interviews and then transcribing them, I then analyzed their responses based on ethnographic, philosophical, and anthropological studies. The conclusions are a combination of my own thoughts and analysis, opinions of those who I interviewed, and of the scholars I examined throughout my research.

In addition to interviews and research, I included photographs of the people I interviewed along with their objects in order to convey the images of the items I am speaking about for the duration of the paper. Attached are the photographs, composed without the faces because I wanted the individual’s identity to be highlighted through the objects, and not through their physical appearance. In the photos the objects are placed close to the subject’s body to convey a sense of connection between the object and its owner. To us, we just see an object, but to them, it is a friend, a family member, and essential to creating home.

2.1 Sentimental Objects

As international students make their move abroad, they can be described as people who are in transitional phases. This means they are changing from their past identity and entering an unknown world. International students “undergoing role transitions may turn to objects to provide concrete evidence about their identities [and] suggests that role transitions are contexts where objects are particularly important as constitutive elements of identity formation”². As these students create their new home in England, these objects help remind them of home providing “concrete evidence” that the old self is still real. As will be exemplified further on in this paper, it appeared crucial for these international students to have their sentimental objects with them as they were going through this transition of leaving home and entering an unfamiliar place. Identity from home is projected through the objects onto the new room helping these students remain grounded in their identity as they transition to new and extended identities.

Sentimental objects at the core seemed particularly crucial to creating a home, as they are special to their owners and evoke emotional responses when the owner has them in their room. These types of objects are, “Invested with emotions, concepts, and symbols that are projected onto them by individuals, society, and history. Objects become things, distinguishing themselves from merchandise, which is merely an object with a value that can be used or exchanged”³. They hold the life of stories from childhood, association with special people, a particularly fond memory, and so on, and evoke a given response in the owner and as such, trade in any sort of market value for an emotional value. These sentimental objects helped their owner maintain his/her identity from home as they transitioned into their new identity abroad. While in a new space, these objects created a sense of calmness or centeredness within the owner, which directly is associated with feeling home. Though the objects may be worthless in currency, the significance they hold for the owner surpasses any need to have a numerical value. Despite being thousands of miles away, international students were able to use these objects to help them transition from missing home to creating a new identity while abroad.

To simplify the notion of objects representing a larger emotionally centered concept, they can be compared to a linguistic term, a metonym, which is a word representing a larger idea⁴. For example, when people say, “a university accepted them”, the metonym here is the “university” because it actually represents the larger concept of the people on the board of admissions. The same happens with objects. A person can carry a photo album, or a card, but the metonym in this case is that the card and photo album represent a much larger emotionally charged concept. The card without the meaning is simply a card and could be replaced by another card, but the card with an emotional story behind it then becomes the story and stands for a much larger idea that is the emotional story. As metonyms, objects represent something else and are small parts of a larger whole. Just like how “university” really stands for the people on the board of admission, sentimental objects really stand for the story behind them⁵.

These objects that stand for a larger concept are “used autobiographically, as the cornerstone of a story about themselves, a vehicle to define personal identity...the object becomes a prop, a story telling device, and also mnemonic for certain experience”⁶. Students used these objects as a stand in for a larger idea about their identity as they carried within them stories and memories of a past identity. When speaking about these sentimental objects, the students had to explain to me their significance, and pair the object with its story essentially using the object as a representation of the story. When paired with identity, sentimental objects become symbols for the significance behind them and project that significance back to the owner when creating home.

When comparing the objects of the interviewees, there appeared to be different classifications. Of the 20 or so sentimental objects I encountered, there were three distinct categories: anchor objects marker objects and travel objects⁷. Each was separate in nature and had a different effect on the owner and space around them. Though all contributed to creating a sense of home, each had different ways of doing so and had different sentimental reactions within the owner.

2.2 Anchor Objects

Anchor objects are things that are associated directly with a person’s childhood, or significant grounding event in one’s life, for example a stuffed animal. The object holds within its physical self the ability to “anchor” its owner to his/her identity by providing a means through which the owner can see and physically hold a part of the important and identity-centered past⁸. Feeling home is often associated with feeling calm or centered i.e. anchoring, and when objects carry significance to one’s childhood, these feelings are often evoked whilst in the presence of the object. In contrast to simply an idea of childhood, or a distant memory, objects have the ability to transcend time and carry those feelings within their physical being. As the owner experiences something significant with the object, the object then

becomes that significance⁹. Instead of just a stuffed animal, it then becomes a stuffed animal that experienced childhood with the owner and the owner then projects that significance onto the object. Perhaps unaware of this projection, the owner then cannot separate sentiment from the stuffed animal and in addition, creates a personal attachment capable of evoking a sense of home.

A stuffed animal in this case, would hold a significant part of the owner's childhood identity because through experiencing childhood with the owner, similar to the way a friend would, the owner then places a high amount of sentiment on the object and uses it as a means to physically hold a piece of the past identity. By bringing these types of objects with them, students were carrying a metaphorical anchor to their past identity, which kept them grounded whilst being far away from home. These anchor objects appeared in almost every student I interviewed and appeared to be vital to their creation of home while abroad as will be exemplified later on.

2.3 Marker Objects

In addition, there are "marker" objects or ones that represents a certain point in time where a significant singular event happened that the object then carries within itself and projects back to its owner¹⁰. A specific story is attached to marker objects, which ignites a different sensation in the owner than an anchor object would. Instead of providing a staple to past identity and anchoring owners to childhood like anchor objects do, marker objects provide an outlet of a special moment in the past, which marks a specific point in time¹¹. This point in time that the marker object represents can be a particularly important event, which owners liked to be periodically reminded of. Owners use these objects to transcend time with singular events and can only experience such a sensation through holding the object; a simple memory is effective for re-living the emotions temporarily, but this may fade over time. Holding the object provides the significance and connection to the past that is able to transcend time much more powerfully than a memory.

When creating home abroad, these objects are essential because they carry a sense of identity within them. Whether that is a pivotal point in someone's life or a fun story that the owner attributes part of their identity to, these objects carry within them the ability to remind their owners of that particular event and thus that particular identity. The owner assigned the object a singular meaning in association with that story that then can never be removed from the object; the story then becomes the object and the object the story¹². When interviewing students, it seemed that this type of object was prominent throughout almost everyone; they all had one or two things that were associated with a specific story, and explained the object of having that experience with them as if it were a person who had been there with them. These marker objects carry within them the ability to remind the owner of a special time and through being present in their room while abroad, help remind the owner of his/her identity and help create a sense of home.

2.4 Travel Objects

While conducting the interviews, the primary objects seemed to be anchor and marker, yet as I got back to the states and furthered my research, there appeared to be a particular type that didn't quite fit into marker or anchor and thus I created a new category: travel objects. Instead of anchoring someone to a distant past identity, or carrying within them a singular story, travel objects contain memories of a certain place and longer span of time. Examples of this include a plane ticket to a vacation destination, or a map of a city the owner has been to. The plane ticket does in fact have a singular story attached to it, but the plane ride itself is not the significance of the ticket; the significance is the whole journey of being at the destination on the ticket. It is the same with the map; the significance does not necessarily lie within the purchasing of the map as if it were a marker object, but more so to the city and the entire time spent traveling around there. When held in the hand, these objects suggest something different than that of marker or anchor objects thus requiring a new category.

These objects create an emotional response that is felt more strongly through holding the travel objects than simply in a picture or a memory. The travel objects hold within them the significance of traveling to a destination that would not otherwise be experienced through just a memory. Travel objects in particular hold within them the entire experience of a trip and as such become a prop through which the experience is projected back to the owner. Instead of a general feeling, or some specific story, travel objects represent a longer experience associated with place that both ground the owner in his/her identity, and also prompt the owner to be reminded of several small stories and memories of being at that place in general. These objects appeared more often as the semester abroad continued on and students accumulated items in England that they then planned to bring home with them. They wanted to preserve the memory of a certain place and to do this brought these types of objects back with them.

2.5 . Objects within Space

Bedrooms are important to maintaining identity because it is the one place that is claimed completely by the person who sleeps within it; they are the epitome of private space. A bedroom is within “the construction of a domestic sphere [and] achieves its sense of privacy precisely through defining itself against another sphere experienced as public” such as a living room or a kitchen¹³. Within a bedroom, one can create a bubble of complete self by placing personal objects in the area to essentially claim it as theirs, similar to how an animal would mark its territory. If someone sees stuff that is not his/hers specifically within a bedroom, then he or she would know to stay away; the personal objects mark the territory as private and provide a signal to outsiders that the space is no longer public.

Similar to my study on how objects create personal space within public space, the objects each student brought with them from home helped to define their private space against the public space that was the home owner’s. Most of our living situations consisted of subletting another person’s house for the duration of our time studying abroad. In my house for example, it was completely furnished and stocked with everything we’d need, given it was someone else’s family home, yet upon arriving, I felt as if I were living in someone else’s room despite the family not being there. Their bed, their curtains, and their wall decorations were scattered around what was supposed to be my private room. When I unpacked and placed my personal things around the room, it became more and more mine. I recognized the stuff in the room and the objects projected their familiar stories back to me to orient me within the space. Instead of seeing someone else’s bed, I saw a bed with my backpack from home on it, and instead of seeing someone else’s closet, I saw a closet with my clothes in it. Slowly the room was developing before me with the more and more stuff I unpacked. It wasn’t until I pulled out my university tee shirt and my grandmother’s ring that I felt truly as if I had made a home. Without these objects and my identity engraved into them, feeling home in someone else’s house would be near impossible. Though everything I unpacked belonged to me, nothing had quite the sentimental and emotional response that my tee shirt and ring had.

This happened with everyone else in my study as well. When I went over to their houses and asked them to produce their stuff from home, the objects came from shelves, from walls, from beds, and from other visible areas of the room. By displaying these objects instead of leaving them in the suitcase, students were representing themselves to others who happened to enter the room by differentiating their space from someone else’s and also so that their identity within the objects could project back to them as the owner. When I walked into my friends’ rooms, I was unaware of the significance of the sentimental objects until they pointed them out to me. The teddy bears, the cards, and plane tickets meant nothing to me, but to their owners, their sense of self and sense of home was embedded within those objects. Without those objects visible, not only would they not have claimed a personal space, but they would not feel home¹⁴. These objects provided a means through which boundaries were set and reminders of identity could flourish.

Sentimental objects had the ability to transform the space in which they were placed. They warned me as an outsider that the space belonged to someone else and that the space was separate than something public. In context with the bed especially, I was able to declare that this was someone’s very personal space opposed to just a living room. The objects reminded their owner too that the space was theirs, and not only was it theirs, but it was their temporary home. Specifically studying abroad requires the creation of home because people are away from their real home for months and sometimes even years. These objects help situate the owners in an otherwise unrecognizable place through prompting feelings of sentiment and identity when they are seen, which is crucial to those who choose to leave home for extended amounts of time.

3. The Students

The following people were chosen to highlight the effects and outcomes of an international student moving abroad and attempting to create a new and temporary home in a previously unrecognizable and unfamiliar place. Though I interviewed seven more people, I feel these three are especially significant in the argument that objects from home help create a temporary home abroad. The others were helpful, though not mandatory to making a solid point because some were more shy about their objects and did not provide significant and workable information, others had objects that still remained in their suitcase and therefore did not appear essential to creating a new home, and others had travelled abroad so many times that they had been accustomed to leaving things behind and did exactly this in Sussex. I chose to exclude these people because the following three seemed far more essential to my argument and I believe will be more informative to the reader.

3.1 Livy

I asked one friend of mine, Livy, to grab a few objects that she brought with her to England that she couldn't live without. She went and grabbed a medium-sized, light brown teddy bear and a small, toy mushroom that was red with white polka dots. I laughed when she lunged off her bed with excitement to grab these two things off a shelf above her dresser, and introduced them to me as "harry" and "mushroom". They each had names and she held like she would a baby: gently and protectively. I asked her what made her choose those two objects to bring with her all the way from Canada and she paused before replying, "Well, I just couldn't imagine living for six months without them...like I don't know, I just need them in my room". She giggled as she held them in the air and examined them and then placed them on the bed in front of her.

I then asked her what significance they had to her and she looked at the mushroom while she held it softly in her hand and answered, "This one I accidentally stole from a bookstore back in primary school. I think I grabbed it and forgot to put it down; to be honest I don't remember how it happened I just remember feeling so embarrassed that I couldn't tell my mom, so I hid it for like months in my night stand. I felt like it was a secret, you know, like an 11-year-old badass. And ever since I just feel like there's a secret between it and me and I like that, it always makes me smile when I re-remember it's there". I then asked her why she bothered to bring it to England and she replied, "Well like, I knew I'd get home sick, you know it's just kinda inevitable I guess, so when I was throwing everything in my suitcase, and I looked at all my stuff, I just grabbed it and put it in. Again, it just made me feel like it's this random secret that I have and I wanted it to come with me to see England", she laughed, "Like I wanted it to adventure with me".

The mushroom was like a friend to Livy. It had a story attached to it, specifically to a precise point in her life, and she felt a human and personal connection to it despite it being an inanimate object. She assigned the object a personal history and thus essentially a "life" to the object, which then as the owner, she feels responsible for and attached to¹⁵. Once the object is given a "life" through it taking part in a story associated with Livy as a child, it then holds meaning that places it as more significant than say an ordinary pen or a pillow that has no meaning to her.

In the mushroom's case, Livy was attached to not only the story within the mushroom, but the significance of the story in relation to Livy's identity. She associated the mushroom with a specific point in her childhood, perhaps a significant point in her independence from her mother in the way that the story of the mushroom was a secret between her and the mushroom. The mushroom may be ridiculous to someone who does not know the story, or did not experience the thrill of the secret with the mushroom, but to Livy, it wasn't ridiculous, it was a part of her and a part she liked to remember and carry with her in its physical mushroom form when she moved.

It was the same case with the teddy bear, Harry. She introduced the stuffed bear as she would a person: with a name and history. As she started to talk about him, she picked him up and presented him to me just as she would a friend. She told me he was a gift from her grandfather when she was much younger. She then explained to me that, "Harry is like that thing that I wouldn't know how to live without. I know it's not a life or death necessity, but he's just been there with me and I couldn't not bring him to England with me. Like if my house were on fire, I'd grab Harry; he's just important to me for reasons I can't really explain". She then went on to say the teddy bear in a way is a piece of her grandfather who has since past away, and to her, the teddy bear was a necessity for her trip to England; it was as if she were bringing a piece of her grandfather with her.

By assigning a sentimental meaning for the bear, Livy was claiming the bear as far more important than any ordinary object, and without the bear to convey the story, that physical remaining aspect of her grandfather would be lost. The bear carried on the story in itself and when she saw the bear, she was reminded of her grandfather; his memory transcended time because it existed within the object¹⁶. Similar to the mushroom, Livy felt more closely connected with her past when she saw it. No other bear, and no other mushroom would do a justice; they would not have the same sentiment and meaning attached. Later on in the conversation she explained to me that, "When I see them I think of happy times, and I knew that I'd feel more comfortable with these with me in England. Like if I were sad or missing my room back in Toronto that I'd feel more at home with these two in my hand. They just make me feel safe I guess, like if I have them, then I'll be okay". By having the objects with her, she was carrying the story with her; the two were inseparable.

For Livy, the mushroom and teddy bear were not things with market value, they were a part of her being, so much so that they carried a part of her past within them and were powerful enough to make her feel safe. They were emotional safety items that carried part of her within them specifically distinguishing themselves as different to an object with market value that can be easily given up or sold¹⁷. When she made the decision to bring the mushroom and the bear, she made the decision to bring part of what reminded her of home where she felt safe, thus when she

saw them in England, she was creating a temporary home away from what she had previously known as home; without the objects there to hold the stories and project them back to her, this may not have been possible for her.

Here, Livy's objects fit under 'marker' and 'anchor' objects as previously mentioned¹⁸. Harry in this case, would hold a significant part of her childhood identity because her grandfather gave the bear to her. By bringing Harry with her, Livy was carrying a metaphorical anchor to her past identity due to the bear's projection of an important story back to her. In contrast, the mushroom can be seen as a marker object. The mushroom has a specific story attached to it and instead of providing a staple to Livy's past general identity and anchoring her to her childhood like Harry does, the mushroom provides a means through which a special and exact moment in Livy's past can be metaphorically experienced again¹⁹.

Livy's move to England can be described as a significant transition point in her life; she's leaving home thus leaving most of her home-identity behind. As she gets to England, she has to create a new room in which to live and find ways to connect back to her identity, which she uses the anchor and marker objects from home to help her do. She is switching from playing the "Livy in Toronto" role to the "Livy in England" role²⁰. The objects she brought from home help her to maintain her old role and transition to her new one by reminding her of home and keeping her grounded in her identity. These objects contain within them the ability to transcend time and by placing them around her room, she is projecting to others that the space is hers, and is also projecting back to her a sense of home and identity.

After asking Livy about why she chose to keep these objects in her room she said, "Well like, it's my room, and I wanted it to look like my old room at home. I wanted to try and recreate it so it's more comfortable. I mean you see this place, it's so empty! I wanted to spice it up so I have my random things all over to try and make it mine". The last part, "make it mine" especially stood out to me, because as previously mentioned, Livy was marking her territory; she was using her own stuff to mark the room as her own and not as the landlord's, or as her flatmate's²¹. The objects she brought from home, the mushroom and the teddy bear, were specifically Livy's and held specific significance to only her and thus by being present in her bedroom, marks the room as hers opposed to someone else's.

By placing these objects precisely in her room, she was simultaneously claiming her space and creating a home away from home using the objects that had personal significance to her. As the objects projected their meaning onto the space around them, they helped her create a space that not only was hers through claiming her territory, but also was hers through a direct personal connection to the things within the space²². Though a simple object like a pillow or blanket could claim a space, they would not hold the same essence of home as the mushroom and teddy bear hold and therefore in order to feel at home, Livy needed specifically these objects with direct association with her identity to occupy her personal space in her new home.



Figure 1: Livy with Mushroom and Harry

3.2 Anna

Anna, from Melbourne, Australia, agreed to participate in my project and as I walked into her enormous bedroom with tall, white walls, and chipping paint, she told me to sit on her bed, which was covered with a bright pink and yellow striped blanket. She easily produced her own objects when prompted to find sentimental items in her room. She walked over to a narrow shelf hung next to the window and took down a card with a picture of a tiger and a child on it, and a photo album with “best friends” written with pink marker on the cover. She placed the objects on the bed and began to tear up a bit. “Oh my gosh I’m so sorry, this is so embarrassing” she said, “It’s just I don’t really notice these guys until I want to, and they always get me so choked up”. She then began to laugh and took a deep breath “Okay, I’m ready ask away”. I hugged her and made sure she was okay, and then proceeded to ask my questions.

I asked her why she chose these things to bring with her from Australia and she replied, “Well, as you can see, they obviously mean loads to me. I guess these particular two because, well this card is from my mum and she got it for me the day I left about a year ago. I haven’t seen her since I left Melbourne, so I get especially upset and homesick when I look at it, but it makes me feel okay that she’s still at home. Like I’m happy here, but it’s weird to be so far away from home so it’s nice to have it with me. And the photo album I made with my friends a long time ago, like look at the handwriting it’s horrible. I don’t even really look at the pictures since we’re all so young and awkward, but it’s just something that’s always been in my room and I didn’t want to be without it for a whole year”.

I asked her why she displayed them instead of leaving them in her suitcase and she answered, “I can’t leave them in my suitcase are you crazy? They’d get so lonely in there!” and began to laugh “I have them on the wall because they want to be seen! They have to be like part of my room, they remind me so much of home and this place is so damn empty and blank, they just have to decorate the wall”. I then asked her if she thinks it would be possible to feel at home without these objects displayed and she said, “Well yeah, but I think the room would look awfully empty. I mean I’ve got my clothes and my blanket that I bought from the store here in England, but that’s just stuff, it’s not important stuff”.

Her last part, comparing important stuff to regular stuff, highlights the variation in attachment people feel to their objects within their room. Again it’s apparent here that an entire concept is contained within an object²³. Any ordinary photo album or card bought at the store would not represent the same phenomenon as the actual photo album and card Anna has in her room²⁴. Without the stories attached directly to the objects and the exact objects to the stories, the objects then become meaningless and the stories harder to re-experience. The two become one once the owner assigns a story to the objects and one without the other just doesn’t hold the same emotional effect on the owner.

As I looked around her room, I noticed the various store-bought items scattered around: her blanket on the bed, her small compact mirror, a few textbooks, and a desk in the corner with some notebooks on it. I asked her if those items made her feel at home and to my amazement she replied, “Yeah, but it’s just decorative stuff. Like my flat-mate and I went shopping when I first got here and I got some stuff...to be honest it looks just like my room at home, but I know I’ll leave this stuff behind”. She looked around and then picked up her photo album for a closer look, “this just is different than all that”. It became clear to me that there was a distinct difference in the sentimental things people choose to have within their private space and the things they buy to decorate it. I found myself coming back to the idea of things with market value in comparison to things with sentimental value²⁵. The blanket, notebooks, and mirror could be bought and sold, but the question of selling her photo album was appalling. When I asked her if she thought the photo album could have a market value she made a shocked face and replied, “hell no”. So what makes this distinct difference? Both types of objects claim territory within space, both types represent identity through personal style, and both play a special role in making a home, but what makes the photo album vastly different than the notebook?

The answer lies within the assigned meaning: if an object has a story that is associated specifically with transitional identity, like the card and photo album, then it becomes sentimental because the object itself then figuratively becomes the story; the experience is represented in a physical form opposed to just a memory²⁶. Buying a blanket does indeed have a story as it takes time and effort to take the bus, go to the store, pick it out, and buy it, but it doesn’t have a personal attachment to identity like the photo album and card do. The photo album and card are closely associated with who Anna is at the core, where Anna comes from, and how Anna chooses to see a part of her identity. She doesn’t display the photo album and card because they’re necessary or stylish; she displays them because they’re a part of who she believes herself to be, thus creates a home in an otherwise unrecognizable place abroad.

Anna, like Livy, is experiencing a transition from her identity at home to her identity in England, and the card and photo album provide emotional support for her through this time. As she sees the two items, she is seeing a piece of her past identity. As she makes the transition, these objects help orient her within an unfamiliar space by both representing her identity and claiming the space as her own private zone. By placing these objects in her bedroom,

she is simultaneously reminding herself of her identity through this transitional time, and also claiming the room as hers. Without these two objects, Anna would be left in the new room with only the newly acquired items making it difficult to be reminded of the Anna back in Melbourne and difficult to create a sense of home in the unfamiliar flat.



Figure 2: Anna with her Card

3.3 William

Sentiment doesn't always have to come from something in the distant past, or a special singular story. In a friend of mine from Denmark, William's, case, he collected various things from his travels all over the world and brought them with him to England. After getting to know him, he told me that he has studied in many different countries and had travelled around to everywhere from Thailand to Peru to Paris. Within his travels, he collected ticket stubs, post cards, various currencies, and things of the like. For him, his souvenirs were his sentimental objects. They were valueless to anyone else, but to William, they reminded him of whom he is. I sat down with him in his makeshift bedroom within a living room of a flat in the city center. His bed was behind a room divider with the couch and TV on the other side. On his side of the room divider, the side facing his bed, he had posted everything from his travels onto a larger map of the world. We looked at the map together and were silent as we absorbed everything that was posted on it. He counted everything on there and over the span of about twenty countries he had collected over one hundred souvenirs.

"Do they get heavy in your suitcase?" I asked. "No. Well yeah, but whatever, I want them with me" he answered as he laughed. "I just like to keep things, you know, random [stuff] from hostels, like brochures, tickets, all that...it's so cool for me to sift through it all and I found this map at a charity shop the other day and was like 'yes finally I can hang it all up'". Now the map is part of my collection too I guess" he said as we both still had our eyes glued to the map. I asked him if he had brought anything from his home and he replied, "Man, these places are my home. I moved away so long ago that I guess I just like to find home elsewhere". It occurred to me that 'home' can mean so many different things to different people, and to William, these souvenirs were like anchor objects and marker objects all in one, prompting me to categorize them as the third classification, travel objects. Yes they were acquired through random spontaneous events that usually fit into the category of marker objects, and yes these souvenirs kept him grounded and in a way were anchor objects as well, but they represented more of a place than a certain time²⁷. By looking at these objects, William was able to go back in time to the place from where he acquired the object and experience the feelings of sentiment that were then engraved into the objects.

I asked him what he thought they meant about him as a person and he said, "They remind me that everything is temporary and even though it is, I'm still me. Like I'm still gonna be the same person just with little adjustments and all that, and I think these kinda represent that within me. Like all the places I've been are just additions to what I

know as an individual and it's nice to be reminded of all that". For William, these objects were reminders of who he is and that his identity was constantly changing throughout travel and though the objects were individually representative of distinct stories and events, collectively they held the same idea that he is who he is no matter what happens to him, or where he goes, thus prompted me to theorize the new category of objects: travel. Without the objects there, the travel was all just memories, but with the objects there, each individual story can come to life thus representing the destination as a whole. The travel object then harnesses the grounding capabilities of an anchor object, but encompasses a story within itself that projects a place and many memories back to the owner. A trip then adds to William's identity, and through bringing objects from such travel, he carries that newly acquired identity by way of the object that then projects memories of the travel back to him.

These objects for William, "can be seen as social actors, in that they construct and influence the field of social action in ways which would not occur if they did not exist"²⁸. They act as representation of another time and in that sense, transcend time by bringing to life the stories and places each symbolizes²⁹. Together they represent a larger idea of identity that William is a traveler, and that's who he will always be. By displaying all of it together he is representing himself as one who travels and associates his identity as such, thus these objects can be classified not as marker and not as anchor, but something new that is travel.

Where these objects are located add to William's sense of private space and home. The room divider makes his space specifically his, and by decorating it with these sentimental travel objects, he is projecting his identity to his space to claim it as his own, and also display his self³⁰. He is separating his space from the public sphere, just as Anna and Livy did, by using a literal room divider, but also claiming it as his by displaying his own objects. By doing this, he is creating a space that's his own within the larger public space that is the flat's living room. By hanging his identity charged objects on a makeshift wall, he is creating a home that represents his self within a space that is specifically his.



Figure 3: William with his Travel Objects

4. Conclusion

It seems that through combining sentimental objects and the space in which they are placed, international students are able to create a temporary home despite being thousands of miles away from their true home. Such sentimental objects can work as anchors to an individual's past identity, markers to a special event or point in time, or as a representation of a place with many memories to inspire a feeling of being home. These objects collectively work as a reminder of self-identity in order to make the individual feel more comfortable in an otherwise unrecognizable space, in this case, living abroad.

As objects are acquired throughout an individual's life, they can either pass along as meaningless and be sold or bought, like the blanket and pillows at Anna's, or develop a powerful story within them that only exists within the particular object and the owner who experienced the story. Objects that are the latter and hold powerful identity-inducing stories ignite emotion and attachment within the owner because the stories are transcended through the object and are able to exist within the present in the form of the object. The object then becomes tangible evidence of the past story's existence and as such forms a special bond between it and the owner. Though the story may not transcend to those who did not also experience the story, it creates a special bond within the owner and continues onto the carry the story and create a life and personality within the object that transcends time. These objects have the stunning ability to orient a person in an otherwise unrecognizable place by reminding the owner of their identity and by projecting the larger idea of their story onto the space around them.

The spatial location of the sentimental object plays an enormous role of creating a home. Since the objects in my study were located within the bedroom, I've concluded that within my sample size, these objects brought from home that have a special story embedded within them are essential not only to claiming space and marking a territory within a bedroom, but also creating a sense of identity within the space thus creating a temporary home. In order for private space to be private it has to differentiate itself from public space and by placing sentimental and identity-packed objects within a space, the owner/one who lives in the space is doing exactly that; they separate their personal space from public by marking the territory as separate from others³¹. By doing so, the owner creates a personal temporary home filled with their own identity, which is projected by way of the sentimental objects they chose to bring with them abroad.

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