

The Rite of Relocation: Social and Material Transformations in the Midwestern United States

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ABSTRACT

Concerns of appropriate housing may arise in older adulthood. Some older adults may make life work in the place we call home; others take steps to voluntarily relocate in anticipation of health and other needs. While moving at any age can be challenging, moving from one's home in later life also represents multiple reflections: past, present, and future selves, control of one's space and relinquishing the care of one's space to another person or corporation, family support and family fissures, and the body's capacities and limitations. Moving is examined as a moment where regimes of value are negotiated through competing semiotic ideologies and at times social roles are transformed. Ethnographic fieldwork occurred from January 2009 to May 2012 in the Midwest United States. This paper presents experiences of relocation of material and social role transformation as older adults make this housing and, writ large, life transition.

Navigating one's home can become a serious concern in older adulthood. Some people might make life work in the place we call home, but others, anticipating declining health and other needs, take steps to voluntarily move. The transition from living in one's home to living in a retirement community is significant and can be either a dreaded or a liberating moment for older adults and their family members. Relocation requires a change in habits that are part of what makes one feel like a responsible adult (e.g., home maintenance, snow shoveling), as well as changes in the bases of membership in a community (e.g., from owning one's home to being a renter). Choosing when

I would like to thank the John A. Hartford Foundation and the University of Michigan for supporting this research. This study was supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health, P30 AG015281, and the Michigan Center for Urban African American Aging Research. Additionally, I thank Judith T. Irvine and the scholars of the Michiganoan community for furthering the ideas in the article. This article is based on a portion of my doctoral dissertation, "Leaving Home Later in Life: Voluntary Housing Transitions of Older Adults as Gift Giving Practices in the Midwestern United States" (University of Michigan, 2012).

Signs and Society, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 2014). © 2014 Semiosis Research Center at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. All rights reserved. 2326-4489/2014/0201-0002\$10.00

and where to move can be based on the availability of housing options, real or imagined present health concerns, financial resources, and the configuration of one's kin network.

Moving also entails multiple reconciliations: lives lived and lives desired, relinquishing the care and control of one's space to another person or corporation, family support and family fissures, and the body's capacities and limitations. While moving at any age can be challenging, moving from one's home in later life is a social experience in which the relationships between one's past, one's possessions, and one's anticipated future needs are foregrounded. For many, homes hold memories of events and people, providing feelings of stability and security. As older adults plan their moves, they must consider selling their homes, leaving their communities (or "comfort zone"), and disposing of their possessions to accommodate a reduced living space. Thus, moving is often a time when older adults think about reducing and passing on their possessions. Considerations and discussions of the redistribution of one's objects can provide the opportunity to perpetuate one's legacy among family, friends, and strangers (Appadurai 1986; Marcoux 2000; Ekerdt et al. 2004). Yet such processes may also complicate kin relations, as the act of redistributing possessions can be relationally strategized (Miller 1998), especially if objects are exchanged for future instrumental or emotional support.

This article analyzes the experiences of older Americans in the Midwestern United States as they embark on the journey of voluntary relocations to retirement communities or more navigable spaces (data collected from January 2009 to May 2012). In this multiyear ethnographic study, subjects' ages ranged from 57 to 91. Eighty-one older adults participated in the study, and whenever possible, I met and interviewed their kin ($n = 49$) and professionals related to relocation ($n = 46$). I met some subjects just once but saw others at various stages throughout the moving process (e.g., packing, garage sales, moving day).

Most of the study participants self-identified as Caucasian (95.1 percent), reflecting the demographics of residents in long-term care in the United States. The remaining older adult study participants were African-American (3.7 percent) and Asian (1.2 percent). Twenty-two males and fifty-nine females participated in the study. The older adults were either married ($n = 38$), where both partners agreed to participate, or single ($n = 43$). Most had owned their homes.

Through relocation, older adults work to integrate past selves, understand present concerns, and imagine potential selves. The ethnographic nature of the project involved interviews and document collection (sketches, lists) that were

analytically juxtaposed with participant observation of older adults and their families through premove planning, moving, and postmove adjustment.

Such voluntary moves can be considered processes of material and social transformations that may occur in relocation in older adulthood. Ter Keurs (2006, 59) argues for greater attention to the role of physical objects in examining relationships between subjects and objects. His concept of material condensation defined as “the process of internalization of ideas into physical, material objects” occurs before and after relocation. Ter Keurs also emphasizes that the meaning of things can change intergenerationally. This study features the internalization of ideas into objects and how these ideas are negotiated across generations and the potential consequences of such processes.

Moving as Role Transformation

Moving can be a time to examine one’s life course. When older adults undertake housing transitions, it is a moment that demands rearticulating one’s connections with community, kin network, and material possessions. In terms of the future, moving can be a time for coming to terms with life’s next step, emotionally, physically, and geographically.

Adjustments experienced by older Americans and kin in this study indicate the multifaceted challenges that accompany a change in residence. Erving Goffman (1962, 14) traces the transition, or “mortification,” of “inmates” in a variety of institutional settings. He argues that, in order to undergo socialization in the new institution, newcomers experience “role dispossession,” where they must sever roles once held outside the institution. In this study, many participants were able to maintain former community roles, especially if they moved locally. However, many participants experienced role transformation in the dispossession of their roles, and others assumed additional roles. Role changes may occur before the move into a new setting that can also be understood as role transformation.

Goffman also links personal possessions to role possession: “The personal possessions of an individual are an important part of the materials out of which he builds a self, but as an inmate the ease with which can be managed by staff is likely to increase with the degree to which he is disposed” (1962, 78). The rules that the institution makes regarding objects and their ownership contribute, according to Goffman, to role dispossession. An individual can take some objects to a new space, while other objects will be sold, given to relatives or friends, or discarded, depending both on rules and spatial constraints. Objects have their own “biography” (Kopytoff 1986) as they circulate through being sold or given as gifts, and links between objects and owners ebb and flow. Along the way,

meanings attach and detach from objects depending on whether they circulate between sentimental and market regimes of value (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). Appadurai explains that a regime of value “does *not* imply that every act of commodity exchange presupposes a complete cultural sharing of assumptions, but rather that the degree of value coherence may be highly variable from situation to situation, and from commodity to commodity” (1986, 15). If we apply these concepts to relocation practices, we see that older adults and adult children may vary in regimes of value based on differing generational or social perspectives. When more than one individual helps to make decisions about objects, regimes of value may differ based on competing semiotic ideologies at play. Semiotic ideologies are defined as “basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world” (Keane 2003, 419), where certain qualities of a “bundled” object are more valued than others due to “their shift in their relative value, utility, and relevance across contexts” (414). Philips (2004) proposes examining competing ideologies from an ecological perspective to understand that contexts permit certain ideologies to flourish.

During a move conflicting semiotic ideologies may surface between older adults and their kin, between older adults and their peers, and between older adults and institutions such as senior living communities. The examples in this article show that moving provides a situation in which the transformation of roles is permitted, whereas remaining in one’s residence may lead to different types of changes. This article expands on Goffman’s notion of role dispossession by providing examples of role transformations that are dispossessed, as well as roles that are added. This article also shows that these transformations occur not upon entering institutional spaces but, rather, in the transitions, and in mundane acts and conversations. These dispossessions and changes may occur in the preparation of the move or “dismantling a household” and in the adjustment after a relocation or “redefining roles in redefined spaces.” Finally, this article offers an update on the types of spaces considered institutional; the desires and resources of older persons have brought about a proliferation in the types of long-term care available in the United States, where dispossession of possessions and place are only one part of the story. Older adult as consumers view institutional spaces with critical eyes and suggestions for spatial (see Perry, forthcoming) and social ordering.

Dismantling a Household: Memories and Attachments

For many study participants, the contents of their homes became a source of surprise, shame, and frustration. Some were surprised at the number of material objects their homes contained in the basements, attics, and in drawers

and cabinets throughout the dwelling. Some were ashamed of the disorganization of the objects, especially when they discovered items were ruined because of neglect or being forgotten. Often, objects became a source of frustration between couples, between older adults and their children, and between older adults and the strangers who would purchase objects while disputing prices. Finally, some were frustrated by what their accumulation of objects might say about them or how, for example, individual pieces of paper had become a burdensome collection over the years.

Evaluating one's possessions preoccupied most study participants, though the types and number of objects varied. Every home is full of things, some being treasured collections and some everyday objects; in the relocation process, there are literally thousands of objects to be sorted, donated, sold, thrown away, or kept. By examining ownership of specific objects, the linking between subjects and objects can be better understood. Mrs. Lewis explores one such object in the following transcript.¹ The additional participant in the conversation below, Sarah, is Mrs. Lewis's daughter-in-law.

- | | | |
|----|------------|--|
| 1 | Mrs. Lewis | We were telling the movers, they were saying, "Huh, all this stuff?" and |
| 2 | | I said well how much stuff would you have after fifty years of marriage |
| 3 | | and moving around. |
| 4 | Mrs. Lewis | Forty-seven . . . |
| 5 | Mr. Lewis | And including a couple foreign moves. |
| 6 | Researcher | Yeah, yeah. |
| 7 | Mr. Lewis | So . . . |
| 8 | Mrs. Lewis | And when you buy something that you really like, then it's harder to |
| 9 | | part with it. |
| 10 | Mr. Lewis | Yeah, definitely. |
| 11 | Mrs. Lewis | If you just buy stuff to have stuff, it's not as hard to part with. But if you |
| 12 | | save your money and buy something you really like, then it is harder to |
| 13 | | part with. |
| 14 | Mr. Lewis | For several years we, not several years |
| 15 | Mrs. Lewis | No . . . |
| 16 | Mr. Lewis | but for some time we ate on the floor. |
| 17 | Mrs. Lewis | We did. |
| 18 | Mr. Lewis | When we first got married. |
| 19 | Mrs. Lewis | When we first married, we had a rug in the middle of the living room. |
| 20 | Mr. Lewis | And we set some candles . . . |
| 21 | Researcher | Ohhh! |
| 22 | Mrs. Lewis | We had our silver candle sticks, and our wedding china, and we sat on |
| 23 | | the rug Indian style and we ate our dinner at night because we didn't |
| 24 | | have, in the morning it was cereal at the counter because we didn't, that |
| 25 | | was the first table we bought. |
| 26 | Mr. Lewis | That was the first table we bought. |
| 27 | Researcher | Which one? |

1. All names, including of locations, have been changed throughout.

- 28 Mrs. Lewis The glass top that's out on the deck.
29 Mr. Lewis On the patio.
30 Researcher Oh, that's nice.
31 Mrs. Lewis There are seats to those someplace.
32 Mr. Lewis Forty-some-odd years ago, almost forty-five.
33 Mrs. Lewis Peter was a baby. We bought a bed and a dresser and a crib and a
34 little dresser and a rocker and then that table and in
35 [Los Angeles], and we still have every piece.
36 Researcher Really? That's amazing.
37 Mr. Lewis Because that bed you saw in the basement was . . .
38 Sarah Do you have the crib?
39 Mrs. Lewis No, I'm sorry, the crib we just got rid of.
40 Sarah Oh okay. Boy, I was just about to say I'm about ready to get rid of my
41 crib and sell it to a neighbor.
42 Mr. Lewis We carried the crib until [place name inaudible].
43 Sarah No, I know because I remember Melissa slept in that crib.
44 Mrs. Lewis Till just before we moved.
45 Sarah No, I remember.
46 Mrs. Lewis And, uh, Peter heard the garbage trucking coming down the street and
47 he came running down the stairs and he saw me in the dining room
48 window crying, and he said I knew when I heard the garbage man I
49 better come down here [laughs].
50 Mr. Lewis Throwing away the crib, we'd put the crib on the . . .
51 Mrs. Lewis the arm of the garbage truck came down and just crushed it and I said,
52 "Oh, my babies teethed on that crib" unfortunately. They shouldn't of.
53 There were, there were Jack's teeth marks on there.
54 Sarah Oh wow.
55 Aw.
56 Sarah I don't have that sentimental attachment to things like the crib we
57 bought. I mean there is some sentimental attachment to that. I sold it to
58 some neighbors because they had room and a foster kid so I went "Here,
59 it's a hundred bucks for it" [laughter]. I mean, what's sentimental about
60 it?
61 Mr. Lewis Well, wait until your grandkids use it.
62 Sarah But it's, the codes change. See the safety things change so fast that
63 our crib probably isn't up to the safety standards now. We have the
64 Pack 'N Play which is like a playpen because, I'm like, "Okay, that can
65 be a crib and it's a playpen," and so I still have that but I don't have the
66 crib-crib because what am I going to do with it?

In this transcript the couple recounts the numerous objects they have collected over the course of their marriage. As objects circulate, meanings attach and detach, or become linked and unlinked, to the objects. This can create anxiety about where objects should go during the moving process. Identifying an individual who will care for an object was often a source of concern, in addition to the logistical challenge of distributing objects to relatives across the country. Relevant to this process is the examination of which objects, under which familial and sociohistorical contexts, require the effort to identify a potential owner and discuss ownership with such a candidate, as well as which

types of objects can forgo such a process and instead be designated for trash. Sometimes, trucks hired for the move would also drop some objects at an adult child's home if the new residence of the older adult was located nearby. Through their possessions, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis remember their past, a time when money was tight, and when they ate on a rug on a floor before they had a table. Their individual biographies and their biography as a couple are intertwined with the biography of their objects. Mrs. Lewis says, "But if you save your money and buy something you really like, then it is harder to part with." She asserts there are different kinds of objects: those you buy just "to have stuff," and those "you really like." However, those embedded meanings of particular objects might not be obvious to another person, such as one's adult child or the next owner. Mrs. Lewis is able to list six items that they purchased in the early years, when her oldest son was a baby, and informs me that they still have every piece. In fact, the table is still on their porch. Additionally, their daughter-in-law asks if they have retained the crib (line 38) as she discloses that she is planning to give away her crib (line 40), since her youngest son has already started elementary school.

Mrs. Lewis reconsiders whether she still has her crib and then recounts the day when it left her possession when she put it out for the garbage truck. She remembers seeing her crib, purchased with hard-earned money, crushed as it was converted to trash. She also remembers the teeth marks from her second son on the crib, indexing her time as a young mother. Her husband ran downstairs to her as she cried. This retrospective recollection of the emotions around the crib is but one part of the moving experience for this couple.

Her daughter-in-law Sarah does not share the same sentimental feelings about cribs. Sarah suggests that with changing safety codes, older cribs may not meet current standards. She also mentions that while she sold her crib, she retains something that can function as a crib, as a place for sleeping, which is a Pack 'N Play—a portable crib and playpen combined. Sarah asserts that the quality of the object—that is, an object that provides a place for sleeping, the most significant aspect of the crib to her—is still present in her current possessions by owning an alternative. When her daughter-in-law dismisses both the emotional and physical value of the crib, Mrs. Lewis counters, "Wait until your grandkids use it." This conversation uncovers intergenerational differences in valuing of objects, where Mrs. Lewis values the family history that becomes integrated with the use of crib by family members. This value system is established and recreated as different qualities of objects are appreciated indexing differing regimes of value.

Objects such as cribs function in multiple ways through the moving process. Here I refer again to Webb Keane's (2003) work on the multiplicity of qualities that are bundled at any one time in any given object. Semiotic ideologies guide the study participants in their analysis of what is significant about an object and which qualities in the object will determine whether to keep or discard them. In the case of the crib, (1) the crib indexes a time when finances were tight; (2) the crib indexes a time when Mrs. Lewis was a young mother; (3) the crib indexes a time when her children were babies who teethed on the crib; (4) the crib indexes her move in that she saw its crushing and compacting by the garbage truck as part of the dismantling of their possessions; and (5) the crib indexes intergenerational continuity, as her grandchildren had also used the crib within the last decade. For the daughter-in-law, the crib functions as a place for sleep, achieved by owning a Pack 'N Play. The utility and the change in safety standards, a changed context producing value incoherence according to Appadurai, are important qualities for Sarah. The crib does not have the same associations for her, resulting in the crib and many other objects discussed in this project being viewed as unimportant, a view shared by other adult kin and grandchildren. Memories are sometimes not known by the next generation. Even when they are known, they may not be valued, and even if they are treasured, the next generation may not want to store them in their own homes.

Dismantling a Household: Packing Up Possessions

Competing ideologies about ownership emerged during packing. Packing up possessions happens everywhere in the home—from the basement to the attic, from the bedrooms currently used by the older persons to their children's former bedrooms, from the kitchen to living rooms. While packing involves decision making in every room, in this section, I focus on the mundane happenings of packing up a mud room.² A mud room's ostensible purpose is to serve as a transition point, from the outside to the inside, from the community to the private world of one's home. Sometimes, mud rooms contain laundry equipment and wash basins. In this interaction, there are ideologies at play about the material contents of this mundane space.

2. Some readers may be unfamiliar with the term *mud room*. In an article from the *Washington Post* (July 5, 1958) titled "'Mud Room' Protects Home," a mud room is described as "a place to freshen up before entering the living areas of the house." I would like to thank Ben Smith for suggesting that this mud room might evoke different connotations if I termed the room a "laundry room," given the gendered associations of laundering clothes in the United States. For the purposes of this analysis, I examine the space as a mud room in which the cleaning and drying of laundry occurs, but in which other functions of transition also occur.

Mud rooms make homes, and their owners, “distinct,” in Bourdieuvian terms. Many homes of study participants did not have mud rooms; instead laundry was sorted and cleaned in basements, and homes had less singularized space for transition. David Cullen (2003) suggests the commodifiability of such a mud room space: “You know what I’ve never seen in a mud room in a typical, fancy-schmancy house? Mud. There’s never any mud in mud rooms. All you ever find in mud rooms are sparkling clean tile floors and green, lace-up, rubber-soled shoes from L. L. Bean. But stick ‘mud room’ in your ‘House for Sale’ ad in the Sunday newspaper and you get to tack on another \$5,000.” Having a mud room indexes a home of a higher socioeconomic value.

In addition to a space of “distinction,” this space serves as a safeguard in many ways. First, the room acts as a safeguard from making other areas of the house unclean. Second, the room provides a storage place for “just-in-case” items used to safeguard inhabitants, such as flashlights, replacement extension cords, and light bulbs that help keep interior spaces functional. Figure 1 is a photograph of the mud room owned by Mr. and Mrs. Keith. When I first asked them for a picture in their mud room, Mrs. Keith said that it never occurred to him to take a photo of it despite the fact that they took pictures of other rooms of their home. Mr. and Mrs. Keith sent me their sketch of the first floor with the mud room labeled “laundry.” The following discourse between the couple and their daughter Nancy highlights, I argue, role transformation within a kin network.

During our packing of this mud room,³ which lasted an entire afternoon, Nancy said to me repeatedly, “God, how many boxes of light bulbs do we have?” We also addressed collections of flashlights, ant spray, marbles for fresh cut flowers and ponchos. Mrs. Keith said to me, “The decisions are all agonizing. I’m almost to the point where [whispers] I could just throw it all away.” A little later, she says, “I’m beginning to envy people who have left, or more, lost all their stuff, or they don’t have it anymore.” To which I replied, “Yeah, it’s like instantaneously gone.”

- | | | |
|---|------------|--|
| 1 | Nancy: | This is one of my dad’s ones [less clear] parents, when you go through |
| 2 | | some of this stuff you learn something about your dad. |
| 3 | Researcher | Which is? |
| 4 | Nancy: | Why would anybody need so many light bulbs? |
| 5 | Researcher | Yeah. |
| 6 | Nancy: | Nobody needs this many light bulbs. Um, . . . |

3. Packing a mud room requires a lot of work—subjects in this study often commented on their fatigue and their need to pace themselves while sorting and packing. I thank Elizabeth Povinelli for suggesting that the embodiment of rituals is an area for further exploration in anthropology. In the ritual of moving, the labor involved for older persons has been underexplored.



Figure 1. A mud room (photograph taken by a research participant and used with permission).

- 7 Researcher Yeah, but, it's a big house, right, I mean [laughter].
- 8 Nancy: It's kinda like, how many things of ant spray do you need?
- 9 Researcher Yeah.
- 10 Nancy: So, [Name] and I finally figured out, you know what, when you're not worried about your budget,
- 11
- 12 Researcher Yeah.
- 13 Nancy: and you think you need something, you just get it. Yeah, you just get it again, and again, and again, again, again, again, again.
- 14
- 15 Let's see now, you've got enough paper? Okay I'm good.
- 16 Researcher Do you think it's also cause things go on sale, like you see some, a sale?
- 17 Nancy: No, no. He's not a sale shopper, never has been, that's me.
- 18 . . .
- 19 Researcher [Laughter] Wow, you got light bulbs.
- 20 Nancy: We have all these light bulbs, and none of them fit, Mom [addressing mother at a distance].
- 21
- 22 Mrs. Keith: It's like screws, [husband's name] has a thousand screws, and never the right one.
- 23
- 24 Researcher [Laughter]
- 25 Nancy: Well, I'm sorry, just put one in for now.
- 26 Mrs. Keith: I couldn't find one that I . . . All these light bulbs, and I couldn't find one.

Here, daughter Nancy explains to me that by seeing so many light bulbs, she better understands her father's spending patterns. She says he is not a bargain shopper. He is just a continual buyer. As is made clear the last line of this transcript (where Mrs. Keith declares that she still cannot find a light bulb that fits a particular lamp), even if one has many light bulbs for specific spaces and con-

figurations, one might still need more. During this part of the conversation, Mr. Keith is actually replacing light bulbs around the house while we pack up the light bulbs.

In exploring shopping for provisions Daniel Miller (1998, 149) suggests, “what the shopper desires above all is for others to want to appreciate what she brings.” In this case, it is Mr. Keith’s labor as a purchaser of light bulbs and other emergency items that is being analyzed by his daughter, and the objects he brings into the house work to construct his role as caretaker of the home he designed and built. This role might change as he moves into a senior living community where he is no longer a home owner. However, as indicated later in the article, caretaking of space takes on different practices in his new residence. Nancy does not view her father as a bargain shopper; however, in a subsequent interview, Mr. Keith recounted to me how a local store, as part of an annual promotion, would mail its customers a brown paper shopping bag—anything a shopper could fit in the bag was priced at 40 percent off. Mr. Keith always got light bulbs.

Later in the conversation, Mrs. Keith says that it is her husband’s job to sort through his collections:

- 1 Mrs. Keith: Those, dad has to see here cause those are his things. He loves
2 flashlights along with other things.
3 Nancy: [Researcher], there’re more flash lights, I mean, more bulbs up here.
4 Researcher Oh, great, okay, but these don’t go, you’re not worried about, like, bulbs
5 that match the lamps you’re bringing or anything like that, right?
6 Mrs. Keith: Well, yes, I do have to, I don’t know what we’re gonna do about that.
7 Researcher Okay.
8 Nancy: You will go to the store and buy them, when you need one. Right now,
9 you just don’t need to pay to move ’em. Think about that, how much
10 does it cost you to pay to move this stuff, versus getting a new one when
11 you get there? It probably costs you more to move them.
12 Researcher I have thought about that.
13 Nancy: Oh, yeah, what about these bulbs?
14 Mrs. Keith: Yep.
15 Researcher I’m gonna put ’em in the box. I, I can put them in the box.
16 Nancy: She wants them in the container.
17 Researcher Yeah I’ll put them in this box.
18 Nancy: I think it costs you more to move this stuff than it does to buy new ones.

Mrs. Keith seems to be protecting her husband’s belongings by not letting the sorting through them be expropriated to another person (lines 1–2). Also, there are no current worries about keeping light bulbs that fit in lamps that they currently own (lines 6). They are choosing to put them into circulation by way of an estate sale and will worry about whether they need bulbs in the future. Nancy tells her mother the plan, to buy new. Then, when Nancy asks,

“Oh, yeah, what about these bulbs?” Mrs. Keith says, “Yep.” Mrs. Keith’s protection of her husband’s collection is now noticeably absent. In Goffman’s framework, in addition to Mr. Keith, Mrs. Keith may also be analyzed to have experienced “role dispossession,” as her daughter assumes the role of disposer. Nancy is rather emphatic, saying earlier, “We have light bulb stores in . . . [Springfield],” the town to which the couple is moving, just two miles from Nancy:

- 1 Mrs. Keith: So, let’s sell the light bulbs, how ’bout we sell the light bulbs?
- 2 Nancy: Dad, you can, you can buy new ones, we have light bulb stores in, in
- 3 [Springfield].
- 4 Mrs. Keith: We’re not moving the light bulbs.
- 5 Researcher Well, also, they’re supposed to change the light bulbs.
- 6 Nancy: That’s right, in your lamps.
- 7 Mrs. Keith: [Laughter] I can’t imagine calling Ray and saying, “Ray, I need you to
- 8 change a light bulb.”

An additional reason for selling the light bulbs emerges, aside from the availability of bulbs in the new town. In the near future they are relocating to a retirement village in the Midwest. Besides paying for their residential unit, their fees include exterior maintenance, such as lawn care and snow removal, and interior maintenance, including changing light bulbs.

The interplay of subjects and objects in the moving processes can be interrogated according to cohort and sociohistorical contexts. In figure 2 the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) highlights the connection between light and safety, perhaps to emphasize that lighting serves as a talisman against



Figure 2. An excerpt from the AARP.org website, found in the section “Preparing Your Home” (http://assets.aarp.org/external_sites/caregiving/preparing/lighting_your_home.html).

predators and personal injury. In fact, lighting is one of the criteria for assessing safety of older persons' homes. One who is responsible for the maintenance of the light bulbs of the home acts as a protector. As the older persons in my study were often home owners for decades, maintaining the safety features in their homes was one of the jobs. These roles, however, were subject to change. Through the ownership and then dispossession of light bulbs, role dispossession also occurs as semiotic ideologies about ownership, excess, and availability of commodities (e.g., replacement light bulbs) are at play. Responsibilities for maintenance have shifted to someone else—in this case, an institutional stakeholder. Additionally social roles of protector or care of a home's inhabitants, supported by well-lit spaces, are also relinquished, though perhaps not entirely.

Redefining Roles in Redefined Spaces: Kinship and Light Bulbs

This negotiation that is taking place is entering uncharted territory for this family. However, it is important to note that understanding this space as domestic, as opposed to public, matters in this negotiation. It is a moment of transition, in this space of transition. But I argue that the negotiations taking place here, an unremarkable event in an unremarkable space, present several ways of "knowing your place" (Perry 2012).⁴ A person can "know a place" in a few ways. First, knowing one's place can refer to learning one's roles in a family after moving to a senior living community. Mr. Keith's role of maintaining his family's objects in their domestic space is transitioning in the moving process. Nancy, coming twice per month to stay for an entire week to help, has given a lot of her time to the move. She is transitioning the adult child's role from assisting to asserting, in David Ekerdt's terms, in the decisions made regarding the move (2006). She is also preparing to help her parents in the future, when they will need more assistance in other areas of their lives. Second, the Keiths are changing physical spaces, from the place they built and maintained to a retirement community, where others provide maintenance. Mr. Keith's maintenance role will be reduced, if not relinquished, due to the type of residence and community that they have selected to move into. Third, they are entering into a new life stage. Marcoux (2000, 219) argues that divestment is a type of investment. More specifically, it can be considered an investment when the objects contribute to the treasuring of a person's memory. Not every object one owns can have that importance. In this case, the light bulbs are not functioning semiotically to index the memory of Mr. Keith using Marcoux's framework.

4. "Knowing Your Place" was the theme of a panel discussion at the Michigaoan 2012 conference.

Instead, they function semiotically to index changes in roles within Mr. Keith's domestic space. I also suggest that even when older persons are moving, as demonstrated in this case, they may not be in complete control of the divestment process.

Scholars analyzing the circulation and meaning of objects have suggested a collection might represent other things, such as consumer habits, kinship network role redefinition, and feeling weighed down by objects. For the latter, Nancy Munn's (1986) work on yam storage in Gawa is a useful lens. She suggests that collections of yams vary by typology: those for seeding for the next crop, those for daily consumption, and those for visitors (54). The visitors receive the best yams of the harvest and, she writes, "The model of excess is especially important, as we might expect, in connection with Gawa's overseas hospitality. For visitors to be able to eat their fill, and yet to see at the same time that there is plenty left over—that there is much food that is rubbish on Gawa—is an ideal image of their community that Gawans would like to have broadcast overseas" (88).

In many ways, the sheer quantity of objects in older adult Americans' households (or perhaps in all Americans' households, regardless of age) also provides opportunity for rot, as items put away in basements and attics were often discovered damaged as the study participants and I were planning to pack or sell them. The possibility for rot sends the same message: we have enough and there is more than enough left over. In a way, excess represents vigilance in accumulation. In contrast to the Gawan example, not all study participants viewed excess in the same way. A daughter's view of the light bulbs contrasts sharply with her father's view of the purpose of ownership of light bulbs.

Finally, "knowing your place" refers to a relationship of a subject to a space and what it means to own objects and spaces. Mr. Keith is a particularly good example of a craftsman who custom-built his home, down to the detail of the wood beams and the mirrors. This may reflect a certain socioeconomic background, as not everyone has the resources to build their own home. However, variation of expertise and appreciation of one who "knows their place" exists despite socioeconomic resources. As the son of a carpenter, Mr. Keith lovingly planned every beam of his home. He brings his knowledge to his new space. Mr. Keith's adjustment is also affected by his "knowing your place" expertise. His light bulbs, like Christopher Tilley's examination of net bags, serve as "material repositories of knowledge" (1999, 62).

In general, packing one's possessions proved to be strenuous for many study participants. Their possessions were part of their identities, and parting

ways with their possessions proved at times to be an emotional experience. Emotion was exhibited in conversations about baby cribs of now-grown children and about art collected by a beloved partner. In other cases, the sheer amount of items in a home caused some to be less sentimental. The owners wanted to finish the job of packing all the items and did not wish to explore the emotional connections to so many items.

Redefining Roles in Redefined Spaces: Is This Senior Living?

If role dispossession occurred through both the purging and packing of items, there was another way space was redefined, namely, through questioning whether certain items or features in a new home would be considered appropriate for older adults. In other words, how do the indexical links between objects and places and their owners change and possibly reduce the field of available links as people age? This occurred when older adults wondered if certain architectural features should be found in places constructed for the well-being of seniors, or if, after moving, there were certain ways of navigating spaces that could be construed as mismatched with the idea of senior living. For example, using stools of any kind became a questionable practice for some of the residents of moving to several different senior living communities. Thus, based on a particular semiotic ideology, stools did not seem indexically linked in an appropriate way to residences of older adults. Older adults in the study who had brought stools for their bar areas or foldable step stools to be stored in closets expressed shock at the need to use stools to reach items in their kitchen. Mrs. Ash, a study participant who had moved to a senior living community out of state, quickly pointed out to me that she was unable to reach some of the items in her kitchen cabinets. As shown in figure 3, there are no objects placed on the top shelf of her kitchen. She does, however, store a small step stool in case she needs to reach items. As she was already age 91 at the time of her move, she is concerned about the risk of falling. Another study participant, Mrs. Chaney, also expressed her concern about the objects on the kitchen shelves.

- | | | |
|---|-------------|---|
| 1 | Mrs. Chaney | I have a stool . . . that I bring in and I go up and get my things. |
| 2 | Researcher | In your old house, did you have cabinets you couldn't reach? |
| 3 | Mrs. Chaney | No . . . a few inches down would make a difference. |
| 4 | Researcher | Do you think about it every time you're getting things? |
| 5 | Mrs. Chaney | Of course. |

Mrs. Ash, Mrs. Chaney, and others raised the issue of using stools, which leads to the question of unexpected features in senior living housing. They did not expect to need to use stools to access their belongings, citing safety concerns. Falls are, in general, a key concern of older adults, given the potential for



Figure 3. High cabinet shelves in a senior living community residence (photograph taken by the author and used with the permission of the study participant).

broken bones and other health implications (even death).⁵ When barrier-free environments, or environments that promote accessibility, are marketed, they are usually conceptualized in terms of the width of doorways. The verticality of accessibility is not often addressed. Only one person, Mrs. Jackson, who has

5. The US Centers for Disease Control (2013) report that falls are the leading cause of nonfatal and fatal injuries. In 2010, medical costs directly related to falls were estimated at \$30 billion.

been wheelchair-bound since she was seventeen, requested that her cabinets be lowered three inches to allow her to easily reach the items on the shelves. While some of the others mentioned above use assistive devices, they could have also benefited from a vertical redesign. The two choices faced by the others are either to abstain from using the top shelf or to use a stool to reach the items stored there. Nevertheless, they did not think that stools belong in a home of an older adult. Figure 4 shows how the step stool is used in the home, despite the mismatch between object and home.



Figure 4. A step stool (photograph taken by the author and used with the permission of the study participant).

One study participant, Mrs. Rogers, did not wish to bring a bar stool into her new space, as she did not plan to use one. She questioned why a bar at the kitchen island would be a part of a senior living space. She felt that using stools as seating (instead of as a means of climbing), with the stools to be stored under the bar, was not good for older persons. When I visited her at her original home, where she functioned with a walker and cane at different times, she had chairs or stools strategically placed around her house, such as in a large bathroom, halfway between the shower and the sink to support her navigation of the bathroom. Also, in the kitchen, she had a stool to rest on while chopping vegetables. But in her new residence, she was adamant that she did not want to have stools. In the planning stages regarding the furniture for the house, her son Sam had made two-dimensional cutouts of her existing furniture and furniture to be purchased in the future. Sam brought the cutouts with him, rolled up in his car trunk, on the day they were planning the new house space (fig. 5).

Sam, his mother, and I carefully laid out all the pieces of furniture, including the proposed table yet to be bought; they planned for a table rather than stools. As Mrs. Rogers was also experiencing macular degeneration, she placed a high priority on navigating around her furniture pieces, visualizing



Figure 5. Cutouts of furniture rolled up in the trunk of a car (photograph taken by the author and used with the permission of the study participant).

her pathways throughout the entire house and considering the use of different pieces of furniture for stability. Based on the height of countertop, she and her son decided to purchase a new table that could be placed under the counter to act as a dining table, at which she would sit on a chair rather than a stool. She planned for this, using the cutouts created by her son to make sure the table would fit (fig. 6). Mrs. Rogers placed a different object, a table, in the place where the stools would go according to the design proposed by the retirement community, as a reevaluation of the indexical link of stools and senior living (fig. 7). Her options for seating were purposeful, as she did not pack a stool from her other house to be moved. In this example, the semiotic ideologies about an object (e.g., stools) and the use of stool as a practice are explicitly identified by older adults repeatedly.

Redefining Roles in Redefined Spaces: Transition from Home Owner to Renter

One of the adjustments many older adults had to consider is the transition from being a home owner to being a renter that can occur with moving to a



Figure 6. Cutout of a table (photograph taken by the author and used with the permission of the study participant).



Figure 7. A table added to the counter in a senior living community residence (photograph taken by the author and used with the permission of the study participant).

retirement community. For those who moved to condos or smaller homes, this identity shift did not occur to the same degree, although often with condo ownership, exterior maintenance and choosing lawn foliage may be done by the home owner's association rather than the individual owner.

One day after their move, I visited Mr. and Mrs. James. Mr. James showed me the new flat screen television above the fireplace and explained how he had been arranging for cable hookup. Meanwhile, Mrs. James said that she would join us shortly as she was kneeling on the ground, caulking the grout in the bathroom. When she showed me her project, she clarified that she was almost finished caulking both bathrooms and the kitchen tiles. Since they were renters of housing units where maintenance-free living was advertised as a

reason for moving, I was intrigued by the physical labor Mrs. James was exerting, as well as by the care she was taking for the new space. Mrs. James also often brought banana bread to welcome new residents. After being home owners for so many years, the older adults in this study found creative ways to care for the physical spaces that they moved into.

After many years of taking care of the grounds of his home, Mr. Keith found himself in a controversy over spatial maintenance. The transfer of control over one's space to an institutional entity could lead to struggles over the upkeep of grounds as well as the interior spaces:

- 1 Mr. Keith: I was chastised . . .
 2 Researcher What are you talking about?
 3 Mr. Keith: For picking up the debris. Because the agreement with the village
 4 is that this will be virginal [unclear] timber.
 5 Researcher Oh where it drops, it falls.
 6 Mrs. Keith: Yeah.
 7 Mr. Keith: Right.
 8 Mrs. Keith: It's gotta rot where it falls.
 9 Mr. Keith: Which is, makes it look like a garbage pile.
 10 Researcher Ohhh.
 11 Mr. Keith: Now I have nothing against letting things grow on their own, except
 12 Mrs. Keith: [Unclear—Mr. Keith is speaking over her.]
 13 Mr. Keith: They want us to grow, grow poison ivy and I'm against that because
 14 that is a health hazard. And I think health hazards trump vir—
 15 virginity
 16 Researcher [Laughter]
 17 Mr. Keith: In the forest. [Laughter]

Mr. Keith expresses a number of concerns here. First, to someone who has always prided himself on maintaining his home and yard meticulously, the appearance of the “debris” makes it look like a “garbage pile.” He brings in the example of poison ivy, which is also growing unencumbered. He thinks that the approach of the retirement community is potentially unhealthy. The link he makes between health and disorder may add strength to his concern.

Later in the conversation, he suggests that outsiders notice this policy in action and that the community is becoming “famous,” in Nancy Munn's term. Munn (1986) explores the way that fame is created when others hear of the wealth or, in this case, misfortune of others, as material objects operate as signs of prosperity.

- 1 Mrs. Keith: To me, he's made such a huge issue out of it.
 2 Mr. Keith: No, to her, she didn't wanna bother with it. Didn't
 3 even, she picked up twice, she picked up some twigs.

- 4 Researcher Yeah.
 5 Mr. Keith: I did it for months
 6 Mrs. Keith: No, if they don't want us to pick them up, okay.
 7 Mr. Keith: I, I'm sorry but I live in this community. I have to look
 8 at this community. Others look at this community.
 9 I've had people comment, you know, is it that
 10 [Name of community]'s run out of money, how come

And, finally, Mrs. Keith relates it to concerns about autonomy, which, Mr. Keith emphasizes, requires an adjustment in a communal living situation. Socializing is often a marketed feature of senior living. When socializing includes walking with friends through the community and picking up debris from fallen branches, following the community's rules on groundskeeping is a potential mortification process. Abiding by the community's rules becomes an example of a way to give up one's self.

Another botanical example also illustrates the concept of dispossession of roles and responsibilities. During my fieldwork, I had many conversations in which older adults described their sadness in giving away or downsizing their tool collections. While they were planning to give them away because they would not be in the business of fixing things any longer, giving their tools away was also about giving up control of the maintenance of their homes' exterior spaces.

In some retirement communities where painting and landscaping in front yards are maintained by the institution, hanging baskets could serve as a way for residents to display their gardening prowess and individualize their living units. But in one discussion of what the hanging basket policy of a new retirement community would be, it became apparent that some people strongly wanted hanging baskets, while others were concerned about people who think they are good gardeners but then, really, will let their plants wither and die. Mrs. Cooper, who strongly wanted to be able to create her own hanging baskets, offered to form a committee to water and nurture everyone's hanging baskets in the neighborhood. In later discussions, as community members developed policies, she would ask if grass was even necessary at all in the backyards, where residents are given more leeway to tinker a bit in the garden beds. In the end, hanging baskets were not approved, because they might not maintain the integrity and homogeneity of the community. Attempts at individuality and creativity were restrained in support of an ideology of aesthetic identicality. One reason raised in discussion was that everyone might begin by caring for their baskets but then get sick, or travel, or simply neglect the baskets.

Perhaps by not allowing such individualized displays at the fronts of the cottages, complaints about unkempt baskets were avoided. Certainly, residents

decorated their interior spaces and their back patios and gardens. But their discussions on this policy indicated that sometimes people chose senior living because the exterior would be maintained to ensure similarity. Additionally, staff members, professionals entrusted with this task, would execute these duties instead of the residents themselves. As seen in Mr. Keith's concern about the clearing of debris, moving to a community where residences and property are maintained is valued. Mr. Keith looked to management for their hands-on maintenance, even taking matters into his own hands when things were not done in a timely fashion. In the case of the hanging baskets, some residents were disappointed at this policy, as they wanted to maintain their plants themselves. One resident did put out potted plants and whispered to me that she hoped they would be okay on her front porch. She was not sure if the policy extended to potted plants.

At issue here are also semiotic ideologies associated with public as opposed to private space. Jaber Gubrium (1975) documents other aspects of institutional living. First, he shows the changing ideas of public and private space. This ethnographic work supports Susan Gal's (1995) assertion that public and private space can be both nested and negotiated. Gubrium argues that sleep is considered an activity that can happen in both public and private spaces. When clients sleep in the lounge or dining room, it is termed "dozing" and can be disturbed (180). However, sleeping in one's room means the clients are not to be disturbed. In other words, the same practices can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the locations in which they take place. This classic nursing home study looms as an important work in documenting the trajectories of personhood in long-term care facilities.

In another instance, location matters too: residents' gardening practices are valued when taking place in the backyard but are problematic in the front, resulting in the policy against front yard baskets (since residents might become ill and unable to care for their plants). Also note the ambiguous nature of vertical uncertainty: if hanging baskets are not permitted but potted plants in the same location are permitted, the difference would be the height at which the plant maintains its growth.

Redefining Roles in Redefined Spaces: Community Membership

As older adults in this study moved to less demanding living environments, some encountered unexpected adjustments to their new living situations. For some, living with age-graded peers had not occurred since college dormitory or military experiences. In the interim, many had been home owners of single-family

dwellings where they were responsible for the interior and exterior maintenance of their homes as well as for the activities that occurred within those spaces. For those study participants who moved to retirement communities, it is important to understand what was unexpected, especially since these voluntary movers evaluated their living options as they planned their moves. Kin also experienced adjustments after the moves. The meanings of living with age peers also became clearer after moving.

Moving served as a time for older adults and their kin to examine their roles and relationships and anticipate role transformation. For example, in an interview with the Chaney's, conducted after they moved to the retirement community, Mrs. Chaney reflects on a potential obligation to other residents that may not have been considered before moving:

- 1 Mrs. Chaney There is a drawback.
- 2 Researcher Okay.
- 3 Mrs. Chaney And, uh, what the draw back is that—well, just, it must have been two
- 4 weeks ago—I was taking the dogs out and I saw this fire truck coming
- 5 Researcher Uh huh.
- 6 Mrs. Chaney in, and I thought, “What in the world.” So I put the dogs in the house. It
- 7 was the fire rescue truck.
- 8 Mr. Chaney Up around the corner and across the parking lot from the club house.
- 9 Mrs. Chaney The house next to [Name] and I don’t know what was the
- 10 problem there. [Name] came out too, and she had her housecoat on and
- 11 she was barefoot, and she’s walking towards me and I’m walking
- 12 towards her, and it’s a cold night.
- 13 Mrs. Chaney And, uh, she said you know, “Should we go over there or, uh, what
- 14 should we do?” I don’t know maybe we should call somebody from . . .
- 15 Researcher [Name of Retirement Community]
- 16 Mrs. Chaney [Name of Retirement Community], but I assumed that they knew
- 17 because of the . . .
- 18 Researcher Uh huh.
- 19 Mrs. Chaney And, um, she said, “You know that’s the one drawback of staying in
- 20 [Name of Retirement Community] was that’ll happen—it’ll
- 21 be happening a lot.
- 22 Mr. Chaney With older people.
- 23 Mrs. Chaney With older people . . .
- 24 Researcher So if everyone is older . . . ?
- 25 Mrs. Chaney Yeah.
- 26 Researcher Okay.
- 27 Mrs. Chaney And—because this community is a small one.
- 28 Researcher Yeah.
- 29 Mrs. Chaney You’re going to know everybody.
- 30 Researcher Yeah, yeah.
- 31 Mrs. Chaney And become involved with everybody.
- 32 Researcher Right, right.
- 33 Mrs. Chaney So—and you know—in other words, care for everyone.

- 34 Researcher Right, right.
 35 Mrs. Chaney So it's um—it's something that's . . .
 36 Researcher Something to think about.

In this interview, Mr. and Mrs. Chaney come to terms with obligations of care that may come with residing in a retirement community. In my fieldwork, I saw care taken to give rides to others in the community, bake treats to welcome new neighbors, and involve others in social activities. While experiences of role dispossession are analyzed in this transition, it is also important to acknowledge the new roles are added and redefined. Being a neighbor in older adulthood takes on additional meaning: one can show concern for others in poor health and, since not formally engaged in the workforce, attend to the needs of others. Overall, I witnessed and heard about many acts of kindness among neighbors; adjustment to new social roles did not result in reluctance to become involved with fellow community members. In other words, new practices would develop based on new meanings attached to living spaces in age-graded communities.

Discussion

I have documented the transformations experienced before and after moving. Some older adults struggled with role redefinitions accompanying their move. Others embraced the additional time they gained to direct toward other interests. With the winnowing of possessions, semiotic processes may occur that change the meanings of objects, spaces, and relationships. Only as they unfold in the future will the trade-offs between advantages and disadvantages become apparent.

The transformations may also trigger different types of anxieties for older adults. It was rare that an older adult did not seem concerned or anxious about the packing process. Decisions regarding so many objects provoked a lot of worry: getting good prices for items sold, checking whether adult children were interested in receiving certain items, getting items to adult children if they were interested, and receiving tax deductions for donations. Another set of concerns centered on anxieties about moving because of financial concerns. For those who wished to relocate but could not, other anxieties may surround not having a plan in place for the future.

There may be other anxieties related to the processes of moving. In fact, other anxieties embedded in examining one's material possessions may be present—for instance, the beginnings of cognitive decline (i.e., dementia), at the

root of gathering so many objects of one category (say, light bulbs).⁶ Sometimes, additional items are purchased because one cannot remember whether one purchased them previously. In the case of Mr. Keith, he told me that it was the sale at the local store that prompted his accumulation of light bulbs, and, after multiple interactions with the Keiths, I did not take this to signify early dementia. However, in other situations, the accumulation might display or index the initial progression of a disease.⁷ The act of light bulb ownership in one setting is indicative of spatial stewardship; in another, it could be seen as pathological, or unnecessary, given role dispossession. On the other hand, Susan Gal suggests that the anxiety might be structured around concerns of mobility and that accumulation may index a worry that one's mobility or ability to shop for more items might be diminished in the future.⁸ The accessibility of older adults' homes to shopping is a concern among many urban planners and environmental gerontologists. There may be also an underlying anxiety about dependency and the need to ask others for help with shopping, as well as anxiety when kin are not available to help with shopping.⁹ Finally, kin relations may not be cemented such that relatives would want to help with shopping and other activities of daily living.

Conclusion

This study enhances our understanding of semiotics in three ways. First, in tracing role transformations before and after relocation in the Midwestern United States, a semiotic approach offers opportunity to examine ways roles may be dispossessed and added in contemporary contexts. Second, roles do not readjust after a move but rather along the way, in the packing and discarding of objects, in the creating of policies, and in observing peer living. Moving to spaces where "management" is a stakeholder can be both welcome and disconcerting. However, since these relocations were voluntary, study participants weighed the benefits of moving with remaining in their current spaces that could be difficult to maintain and navigate. Third, this article presents case studies set

6. I would like to thank Susan Philips for suggesting this particular anxiety as well as for encouraging the framing of the ethnographic examples in terms of anxieties.

7. Justin Richland suggested examining why, in the face of hearing about items from a mud room, the psychologizing of the ownership in terms of mental illness occurs. In the early stages of my project, Elana Buch suggested that, when I discuss hoarding (an extreme experience of ownership), I ask the audience why we in academics need to pathologize ownership. I am truly grateful for her suggestion, as this discourse occurs often when I present my research.

8. Personal communication with Susan Gal.

9. I would like to thank Constantine Nakassis for this idea.

in the current long-term care landscape, where variety of residential spaces in continuums of care (independent living, assisted living, skilled nursing facilities) elicits different types of transformations, informed possibly by unique sets of semiotic ideologies and practices. This study shows that these transformations represent differing regimes of value, some within kin networks informed by intergenerational differences on ownership, consumption, and accumulation. They could also be informed by differences in perceived mobility, based on one's health or available transportation modes.

Gerontological scholars have investigated relocation in terms of triggering events such as health changes or the death of a spouse (Wiseman 1980); types of moves such as amenity moves, moves near kin, and institutional moves (Litwak and Longino 1987); and interactions between an environment and an individual's physical and cognitive abilities (Lawton and Nahemow 1973; Wahl and Oswald 2010). Analyzing relocation from a semiotic perspective enhances the literature on household disbandment processes and place-making skills (Rowles and Watkins 2003; Ekerdt 2006; Luborsky, Lysack, and Van Nuil 2011) because the analysis calls attention to the detailed social interactions that inform these processes. Regimes of values based on competing semiotic ideologies are experientially grounded with role transformations as potential consequences. The roles of older adults and kin as well as older adults in institutional frames deepen our understanding of continuity, disruptions, and the labor involved in the moving process. A semiotic lens that highlights otherwise overlooked socially significant practices may help pave the way for families and professionals to support older adults in the process of moving, as well as help older adults understand what is at stake in a move.

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