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Citation for final published version:

Owen, Jennifer 2019. Big yellow sanctuary, cross-dressing, gender, and performance in self-storage in the UK. *Gender, Place and Culture* 27 (9) , pp. 1268-1286. 10.1080/0966369X.2019.1654436 file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2019.1654436>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2019.1654436>>

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Big yellow sanctuary: Cross-dressing, gender, and performance in self-storage in the UK

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Abstract

Finding safe spaces to perform one's identity is a widely acknowledged issue for individuals who cross-dress because it remains a taboo practice in much of society. It is therefore often kept a 'closeted' secret from family, friends, and colleagues. Prior work in other contexts has shown that domestic materiality underwrites identity work, and through their careful display and arrangement possessions can reconcile fractured selves. However, whilst home is a key site for the (re)construction of self, it is not necessarily a safe, private and autonomous haven for all of its occupants. This paper builds on the concepts of identity management and home-making, by focusing on the ways self-storage acts as a quasi-domestic space in which to safely store, conserve and try on material aspects of self which are 'out of place' in the user's domestic life. Drawing on an in-depth, object elicited interview with a cross-dressing man, this paper argues that self-storage is a place of transformation and performative potential, a sanctuary in which to be or become somebody else. Furthermore, it uses the example of cross-dressing to scrutinise and subvert the conceptualisation of 'man caves'.

Keywords: cross-dressing; gender; closet; performance; sanctuary; man cave

Introduction

Whilst queer geographies and gender studies focus on different identities and power dynamics, the major concerns of these approaches clearly align in attempting to understand the critical role of space and place in the production, practices, communities, and embodiments of identity. In the home, queer geographies have focused upon privacy and impression management in 'front stage' spaces and the concealment of identity in the 'closet' (Gorman-Murray 2008; Valentine, Skelton, and Butler 2003; Brown 2000). Studies of the home from the perspective of gender consider the spatialised nature of gendered activities, most recently turning to the conceptualisation of garages, sheds, and workshops as 'man caves' (Browitt 2017). This paper locates itself between these two rich areas of scholarship, considering the experiences of a cross-dressing man, who after concealing his activities and feminine apparel at home, moved them to the safety of self-storage. This paper builds on existing literature on cross-dressing to examine the dualism between home and self-storage through the gendered materiality of clothing (notably Garber 2012; Suthrell 2004).

The paper is arranged as follows: firstly, the relevant literature surrounding gender and cross-dressing, 'closeting', identity management in the home, and secrecy are traced out. Following this, attention is given to the methodology employed in the broader study, and ethical issues that arose before and during the interviews. Finally, the paper turns to a discussion of findings, focusing on the role of materiality in the performance of gender, and the importance of privacy, safety, and autonomy in the production of a transformative sanctuary-like space.

Theorising cross-dressing, secrecy, and the home

According to Judith Butler (1999), cross-dressing is a means of disrupting the performative aspects of gender and enables the individual to subvert the norms of such constructs. Garber (2012, 10) states that 'one of the most important aspects of cross-dressing is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of "female" and "male", whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural'. Within the binary conventions of gender and clothing it is difficult to define cross-dressing because it does not involve just a single, one-sided choice – to wear the clothing of the opposite sex – but many choices: crossing, blending, bending and combining clothes and apparel to create a hybrid and in-between second identity. Clothing is the clue and passport into the (forbidden) world of the opposite and acts as a significant marker of passing over and passing through (Suthrell 2004). As Suthrell (2004, 9) points out, in the Western world it is possible to cross the 'gender barricades', to a certain extent, in one direction, but climbing them the other way often leads to derision. It is this less

accepted cross-dressing of a man into 'feminine' clothing and the spatial implications of what remains a taboo practice which is explored through this paper.

Some individuals whose freedom to express and 'be themselves' is threatened may alter, curtail, or conceal their identities by (re)moving their activities and associated material culture from places where they are deemed to be 'out of place' (Cresswell 1996). As much as a closet is a storage space for the concealment of clothes, it is also a widely used metaphor for the figurative 'closeting' of marginalised identities, such as gay and lesbian sexualities, and individuals who cross-dress. As Brown (2000, 1) states, 'the closet is a term used to describe the denial, concealment, erasure, or ignorance of lesbians and gay men. It describes their absence – and alludes to their ironic presence nonetheless – in a society that, in countless interlocking ways, subtly and blatantly dictates that heterosexuality is the only way to be'. Linked to the history of drag (see Chauncey 1994), the phrase 'coming out of the closet' is used in reference to an individual publicly 'outing' their sexuality. The spatial metaphor of the closet is particularly telling when individuals cannot be 'out' and perform their identities, even to their family within their own home (Duncan 1996, 137).

In a heteronormative society, the 'closet' reinforces the spatiality of identities deemed to be abject and 'out of place' through concealment, denial, and ignorance. By thinking about closets metaphorically, power and identity can be discussed in a way that 'alludes to certain kinds of location, space, distance, accessibility and interaction' (Brown 2000, 1). Despite its marginalised position along these lines, the 'closet' remains 'central rather than incidental to [...] performativity [of gendered and sexualised identities]. It shapes their (in)actions' (Brown 2000, 44-5). For individuals who cannot perform their cross-dressing openly, the 'closet' serves to conceal their identity and its material constituents but also serves as a protective function shielding individuals from confrontation and shame.

Whilst domestic and metaphorical closets have both been conceptualised around concealment and 'moral propriety', the home is often considered more in terms of safety, privacy, and the enabling of individuals to escape the constant surveillance of identity (Saunders 1989). For instance, Goffman (1990a) conceives the notion of stage and backstage (and hence self) as being a 'public-private' duality. Scholars since have described the home as 'the place of maximum exercise of individual autonomy [and] minimum conformity to the formal and complex rules of public demeanour' (Rainwater 1966 in Sibley 1995, 129). By recognising the boundaries of and within the home, certain (backstage) rooms have been deemed to support 'authentic living' because they anchor modes of being in space away from public gaze (Korosec-Serfaty 1984). When necessary, depicting only the 'managed self' involves establishing geographical boundaries between different identities and different activities (Bell and

Valentine 1995, 156). The home has usually been considered a heteronormative habitation (Johnston and Valentine 1995), but it can be queered through practices of home-making to become a temporary escape from hetero-regulation (Gorman-Murray 2008). Valentine (1993) found that lesbians may create the 'impression' of heterosexual identity, through signifiers of femininity, such as make-up and wedding rings, to keep their actual identity private. This could also extend to their homes where layout and decoration could be altered in order to conceal clues about their sexual identity from visitors (see also Gorman-Murray 2012). Even though sexuality and cross-dressing are not strictly related, there are similar issues around acceptance and consequent practices of concealment in the home and beyond.

Whilst for many people home is 'the security of a private enclave where one can be free and in control of one's life' (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, 121), for some the visibility of their activities and possessions need to be controlled so that feelings of comfort can be regulated (Gorman-Murray 2008). As Petra Doan (2010), a transgender woman, describes, 'after being subjected to the ever-present tyranny of gender across the continuum of public and quasi-public spaces, my home is a necessary place of refuge, but one that is not uncontested' (2010, 647). Therefore it is important to draw the distinction between being 'at home' in the sense of physically occupying space and 'feeling safe, secure and at ease' (Kearns and Smith 1994, 422). For some, feelings of alienation, shame, fear, or entrapment may dominate the experience of occupying the intimate space of one's own residence, providing the impetus to seek out alternative 'places of refuge' (Manzo 2003; Valentine, Skelton, and Butler 2003). In this paper it is argued that self-storage acts as a refuge or sanctuary, allowing for a cross-dressing individual to escape the confines of secrecy in his own home for relative security and freedom of expression elsewhere.

Freedom, personal autonomy, and individual identity politics are widely conceived in relation to privacy. As Duncan (1996, 128) describes, the political and spatial dimensions of the public/private dichotomy serve to 'construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude and suppress gender and sexual difference [thereby] preserving traditional patriarchal and heterosexist power structures'. One recent symbolic practice or expression of contemporary masculinity is 'man caves', which Browitt (2017) describes as 'a certain kind of quasi-domestic space dedicated to and inhabited by primarily heterosexual men in spousal relationships' (2017, 207). 'Man caves' can be converted garages, basements, sheds, spare rooms, or indeed self-storage units. They function, through the objects placed there, as a kind of escape and private space for personal expression (Browitt 2017, 207-8). He asserts that 'man caves' are 'generally about regulating emotion [and] giving it an outlet' (2017, 221), suggesting that such freedom of expression is not appropriate or generally lacking in the spaces of the home where activities and possessions are negotiated in the formation of a shared

domestic identity.

Regulated material and metaphorical private spaces, such as the home (or parts of), are understood to allow for autonomy to be most effectively enacted. However, for 'closeted' individuals who experience their homes as spaces of fear, shame, and entrapment other private spaces, such as self-storage units, enable their users 'to more easily free themselves from various types of public surveillance, regulation and public contestation' (Duncan 1996, 129). Combining understandings of gendered clothing, 'closeting', and identity management through home-making practices, this paper focuses on the ways self-storage acts as a quasi-domestic space in which to safely store, conserve and try on material aspects of self which are 'out of place' in a cross-dresser's domestic life.

Research under wraps

The data for this paper is drawn from a larger study of self-storage users, completed between January and December 2016, which explored the motivations to rent self-storage and feelings around these circumstances in relation to broader life events (see Marcoux 2001, for instance). Participants were recruited through self-storage company mailing lists, social media and by staff members who distributed a questionnaire and information sheet on my behalf. Nearly 100 self-storage users completed and returned the questionnaire to me, of which 43 indicated that they were willing to take part in interviews. Subsequently, two-stage interviews were arranged and conducted with 31 self-storage users across the UK. These participants were storing their possessions in self-storage for a number of reasons including moving house, following a bereavement, or to declutter and make space at home.

Chris (pseudonym) contacted me via email to return my recruitment questionnaire, with it providing a very detailed and deeply personal confession. He described his interest in fashion and the struggles he had over the years accepting his desire to cross-dress. Chris explained how he had eventually come to terms with himself, but it remained a taboo area for his wife who could not accept 'a man in a skirt' and insisted he dress conservatively to save her embarrassment. Since Chris's wife had no knowledge of him renting a self-storage unit to store his feminine clothing, our meeting had to be kept closely under wraps. Jeopardising Chris's secret was something I felt entirely uncomfortable about, so I asked Chris to confirm that he was happy to go ahead with the interview (Ali 2010).

Instead of relieving my concerns, Chris's second email to me reinforced my feelings of uneasiness. He was speaking of the excuses and adjustments he would need in order for us to meet. The consequences seemed a lot more real. If Chris's wife found out about the nature of our meeting her mental health and their marriage would suffer.

Was my research worth the risk? I did not know this man (although I knew more about him than I expected many did in his life) and I certainly did not know his wife, and yet I felt a duty of care towards maintaining the status quo (Barker and Langdridge 2010). We exchanged a few more emails in which Chris expressed that whilst there was a risk, he wished to get his story out there. Not wanting to deny him of the chance to do that, we planned to meet at a time which fit with one of his regular excuses to visit his unit.

The performance of Chris's identity unfolded during our meeting and was influenced by the interview and my presence (Denzin 2001): I was to be the first 'audience' Chris had welcomed 'back-stage'. Chris arrived late to our interview, the excuse for his tardiness being that he had gone to his unit first to change. The first of the semi-structured interviews was held in the staff back office. Before starting the interview we spent some time chatting; this was important so that we could build-up rapport and Chris could come to trust me with what would be a very intimate and, at times, emotional interview (Browne and McBride 2015; Morrissey 2012). Continuing in a conversational manner, I started the interview and Chris laid out the circumstances which had led to him renting a self-storage unit. After our initial interview, we went upstairs to Chris's self-storage unit to undertake the second interview, which utilised the presence of objects to elicit more depth around the issues identified in the first interview through individual object biographies (Woodward 2016).

In his unit I could not spot the masculine clothing Chris must have arrived in anywhere. When I asked, he told me 'I've got them rolled up and stuffed in the bottom of this wardrobe'. The masculine clothes that Chris wore day-to-day did not fit with the identity he wanted to perform in that space or in front of me and therefore had been put out of sight. Chris revelled in the opportunity to go through bags and boxes to pick out outfits whilst I interviewed him further. The following excerpt comes from the field diary notes which were written up immediately after the interviews:

Later, after I had exhausted all my questions and Chris had got carried away trying on all of his wigs for me, our conversation turned to my next appointment and his need to get home before his wife started to suspect that he was lying about his whereabouts. Chris escorted me back to the front of the building, I pointed out that his hair was sticking up in an odd way after wearing the wigs, so he tried to flatten it down as we walked. This was the first time in the interview I really felt confronted with the fact that his transformation into feminine clothes was so temporary and in such snatched moments of time. It was almost as though the clock had struck midnight and his coach was about to turn back into a pumpkin.
– Research diary entry

As the excerpt demonstrates, I was confronted by the fact that Chris only had fleeting moments in which to spend at this self-storage unit doing what he

enjoyed. I felt very aware that following our interview he would be going home and would need to lie to his wife about how he had spent the afternoon. In pointing out that his hair was out of place I was enacting the duty of care I felt towards him and was complicit in maintaining the secrecy of his actions, protecting his self-storage 'closet' from being found out (Chekola 1994; Mitchell 1991).

Chris had very unique motivations for/experiences of using self-storage compared to the other participants in this study, who also revealed desires to hide possessions which were 'out of place' at home or could facilitate transitions between past and future identities but were not inhibited in their performance by others. In contrast, Chris needed to control the visibility of his *present* identity in order to keep it secret from a loved one. Relocating his problematic materiality from where it was 'closeted' at home led Chris to use his self-storage not simply as a receptacle for things but as a private sanctuary. Therefore his actions are not so much about 'coming out of the closet' but about going in. This paper provides just one account of cross-dressing, and there are varied and contested ideas around the use of the term (see discussion in Ekins and King 1996; Bullough and Bullough 1993). Chris's individual circumstances, then, are ideally positioned to consider the themes of materiality, visibility and performance which are discussed in this paper.

I took an audio recording of both our interviews and took photos of Chris's unit and possessions with his permission. This was in adherence with the ethical codes of conduct of Cardiff University and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The transcripts of my interviews with Chris were typed up in full and then analysed thematically, along with the other transcripts from the broader study. The following sections explore the key themes and narratives that emerged from the interviews with Chris.

Home is where you hang your wig?

Chris had realised from a young age that he was interested in wearing women's clothing, something he suppressed well into middle age. Before Chris married his wife, he decided to broach the subject of his cross-dressing with her, so as to not have any secrets between them. Initially, she handled it reasonably well but over time it ended up as a taboo area, 'don't ask, don't tell'. Chris's wife questioned his behaviour and was unable to tolerate it, deeming it to be 'out of place', and through their shared, uncomfortable silence defined what was and was not appropriate in their home (Duncan 1996, 139).

I've been out and done it, come to terms with it. I'm at ease with it. [Short pause]
I only wish my wife was.

For quite a while Chris shut his other(ed) identity away, but when he started to travel for work, he began to spend his spare time browsing and buying clothes at charity shops and in cheap sales. This meant he then had to find little places at home to hide his purchases in order to maintain the impression he had stopped cross-dressing. This was because he felt his wife would not be able to cope with his 'transgressions' on top of other significant stresses in her life. The hidey holes he used included little spaces under floorboards, the depths of cupboards, and some high shelving in their garage.

[I] was originally finding little tiny storage spaces at home, odd bits of cupboard, or bit of shelving. One of the main things really was some high shelving in the garage, um... which had a whole pile of stuff on it and I managed to secrete a few bags there because my wife couldn't get up there to see them.

By concealing his feminine clothing in places where it would not be found, Chris was attempting to alter and manage the presence of his alternative identity at home. Whilst this in many ways did remedy the situation, it also contributed to his feelings of being alienated and trapped in his own home (Manzo 2003; Valentine, Skelton, and Butler 2003).

Things like if she was working in the garden at the back, I could sneak out the front, whisk over and pop something into the back of the car. That sort of thing. Um... [He pauses] I hated it being all this secrecy and I still hate the secrecy of doing what I'm doing, but it was even worse when I was trying to do it at home.

Moving clothes in and out of his home, so that Chris could wear them when away for work, was furtive and in uncomfortably close-quarters to his wife. Eventually, as Chris started to run out of space to hide things at home, and his wife's suggestion to redecorate meant there would be added risk of his clothes being found, he made the decision to rent a small self-storage unit. It did not take long, following his new-found freedom, for him to upgrade to a larger size.

It was very difficult getting stuff in and out [of the house] to put them, sneak them into the back of the car when I was away for a night. [...] It wasn't very practical and once I got this place it then, the thing just took off in a big way. And I felt so relieved, so much freedom. Wonderful feeling not to have things hidden in the house. Which meant I didn't need to worry about her finding things and getting all upset by them.

Chris's fear of upsetting his wife if she was to find his feminine clothes led him to 'escape' spaces ruled by hegemonic orthodoxy for the safety of self-storage

(Hetherington 1998). By spatially dividing different aspects of his identity, embodied by the activities and objects 'out of place' at home (for his wife), into self-storage he is putting himself and his things out of sight and out of harm's way. However, Chris is also consciously and deliberately splitting his household possessions, in doing so fracturing and fragmenting his identities across spaces rather than materially reconciling it in the home.

The self-storage 'closet'

The self-storage unit in some ways has characteristics of a closet: it is a small, confining space off a more central open corridor, and its purpose (for many) is to store excess domestic possessions. The two closets – the storage space and metaphor for concealed identity - are modes of separation, defining and ascribing meaning to space. Both are separated from, and connected to, spaces of display excluding but also nothing without the other. The self-storage 'closet' hides those things that need to be hidden and being 'in' the closet is a strategy of living, a status and identity, as well as an experience (Kushnick 2010, 679).

It's just become a way of life now. I don't know how I can do it without this storage and there must be, well I know there are, so many people like me. Uh hidden away in the 'closet' or if they do venture out they all dressed up and pretend to be women because that's the only way they feel they can do it, even if they don't really want to.

Chris counts himself lucky, compared to some other 'closeted' cross-dressers, because he has found a workable solution in self-storage. The performativity of Chris's self-storage unit allows him to try on and experiment with clothes, something he could not easily do at home. In this way he is able to maintain, what Goffman (1990b) conceptualises as, a 'discreditable' status in front of his wife, 'living in the closet' to keep the extent and frequency of his dressing a secret.

Once Chris had built-up a collection of clothing and furnished his unit, he began to find great joy in the freedom his unit provided. He could stop-by to drop-off new purchases, try on outfits in the unit and sometimes change clothes to venture out in. Initially, Chris was worried about how the self-storage staff might react to his changes in appearance, but as time wore on he overcame these nerves. Chris's interactions with the staff grew steadily from exchanging pleasantries, to eventually becoming such good friends with one of the staff members that they would meet for coffee outside of her shifts.

Originally I was just sort of grabbing stuff and changing in the car, and then perhaps change in the car on the way back. Next morning call in and swap over

and get something else. But then eventually after they got used to me here I just thought 'Blow it, I'll change here'. Uh, come in as a man go out as whatever.

The comfort Chris has found to swap between his different gender and dressing performances is enabled by the space of the self-storage facility and his particular 'audience' of staff members. Familiar with Chris and his cross-dressing, having grown to expect to see his more feminine appearance after he has been 'back stage' to change (Goffman 1990a), the staff's direct gaze is no longer perceived as a form of invasion but appropriate in the setting (Tseëlon 1995, 67).

The unit ('closet') serves to ensure that only those garments worn by Chris at any particular moment are visible (Urbach 1996), but inside Chris has the space to experiment and try on different clothing, wigs, and apparel until aesthetically pleasing combinations are found that suit his tastes and mood. The clothes in Chris's unit do not just clothe the body but have complex and interweaving personal biographies associated with them and represent decades of coping with just fleeting moments of respite in which to engage with their materiality (Cwerner 2001). Browsing and trying on clothes in shops allows Chris to enjoy a certain degree of (retail) 'therapy' but the contents of his unit and the autonomy of the space give it more performative potential.

I think I was going to try that with that. And that and that might work quite nicely, and I've got some... there is a whole pile of purple skirts somewhere. In these corners, there are some skirts somewhere. Um, can't see one here at the moment. That's very... that's the wrong colour purple. But I, [He sighs] I've got so many things here it's... God knows when I'm going to wear them. It's just ludicrous, I'm insane you know. I really am insane!

In Chris's case, the practical is tied up with the secrecy of his (in)actions and the time restrictions that sneaking around bring. Chris does not have the time to try on all the clothes he owns, and neither can he perform his cross-dressing identity freely. Many of Chris's purchases were made without the expectation of ever being able to wear the items, but the act of browsing, trying on and purchasing the clothes goes some way towards satisfying his needs. For this reason, many of his clothes remain unworn and Chris questions the logic of his purchasing choices. However, as identified in a number of wardrobe studies, this guilt towards unworn clothes is not unusual and internal dialogues to this end are frequently expressed (see Cwerner 2001).

The volume of clothing Chris possesses provides a vast repertory for self-representation, even in his restricted circumstances (Urbach 1996). Chris can try out different appearances to find the 'looks' that feel 'him' on that day. In this backstage space, he can curate an image of what he wishes to look like for himself without the

need to perform it. He can also decide on outfits that he is happy to be seen wearing front stage, which combine and incorporate his feminine items alongside masculine clothing to make an outfit that does not so obviously 'out' him as cross-dressing. For example, Chris explained that he could 'get away with' wearing women's blouses because they did not look so dissimilar to jazzy 1970s men's shirts, thereby blending a feminine item into outfits he could wear to work.

There are some items, however, amongst Chris's clothes which cannot be subversively combined to produce a 'normal' masculine image (albeit an old-fashioned one by today's standards). The most significant of these is Chris's wedding dress, which he purchased from a charity shop under the pretence of buying it for Red Nose Day fancy dress. Indeed, Chris did wear it, for this reason, a few times but this was not his true motivation for the purchase, which was to capture the feelings of femininity and fantasy he had experienced when trying on dresses in bridal shops. Chris has a sentimental attachment to many of his items, not just the bridal outfit, in part because he has been forming his collection for a long time and has crossed barriers in the pursuit of buying, keeping and engaging with it. Essentially, the self-storage unit allows Chris to shut himself figuratively and physically in 'the closet', where he can try on and experiment with his identity, and then 'come out' to perform, liberated in 'feeling himself' but also in the performance of his gender-fluid appearance.

Coming out of the 'closet'?

In the 'back stage', which in this case we can take to be Chris's storage unit, amongst, to a degree, other spaces in his home (Goffman 1990a), his front stage performances are prepared and clothing props are chosen and tried on. In this space, he is 'off duty' from impression management performances because his clothing is for himself rather than an audience. When he does step outside the unit, he thinks very hard about the kind of impression he wants to make, whether that is by his clothing choices or the cut and style of his wig. Chris chooses from a repertoire of 'faces', which are picked in correspondence to the (un)familiar or (in)significant audiences he will confront in different social spaces (Tseëlon 1995). Through wearing masculine clothing the majority of the time and only changing into feminine clothing in the presence of strangers or accepting others, Chris maintains an everyday impression of 'normality'. When he does venture 'out' in his feminine clothes, he consciously blends items of feminine and masculine clothing together in order to control the impression he gives of either gender.

The idea is that in peripheral vision or at distance I don't attract attention. To the subliminal mind for the passer-by it's just another woman, just another ugly woman walking-by, there are plenty of them. Till people actually look at me and think 'That's not a woman, that's a man!' [He laughs] But I'm not presenting to be a woman but... in face-to-face yeh I'm a man even when I'm wearing a skirt.

So rather than attempting to disguise himself as a woman, as Butler (1993) suggests cross-dressing sets out to achieve: Chris is using feminine clothing to deconstruct traditional gender roles. Whilst he admits that some cross-dressers do try to create the appearance of the women, Chris states that this is not his aim. He argues that despite wearing feminine items of clothing he is not attempting to disguise or create the pretence of being a woman. However, in the pursuit of an idealised image of himself Chris has been experimenting with items which contradict his own line of reasoning.

This [long-haired wig] makes me feel like a totally different person. I know it's a bit effeminate but it doesn't really matter. Gender almost doesn't come into it. I just feel as though I am a completely different person when I wear some of these things. [Pause] I just want to feel as though I can be anyone at all. [...] It's quite a quality wig actually. It's even got a parting on it. But I can't get away with this as a man. But I just... put this on and feel as if a totally different person, and I feel... especially if I've got anything else... with this, it really is a matter of putting a bit of padding on the chest and then you think you've become a different person all-together. It's a weird sensation, I'm not me anymore.

The performativity of Chris's unit gives him the capacity to be gender-fluid and sit between and across the binaries of gendered clothing. For Chris, wearing a wig and padding is not about trying to look like a woman. As he describes above, he enjoys wearing women's clothes and how doing so makes him feel like a different person. It could be argued that by wearing chest padding Chris would be attempting to disguise his masculine appearance in fitting with his clothing, but he explained that for the most part, he does not wear chest padding and only does so when the women's clothes he is wearing need something to 'fill them out'. Chris's clothing choices are limited by his masculine physique fitting the shape and cut of feminine items of clothing. Mostly Chris chooses apparel that has been designed for a 'slender woman', but sometimes when the perceived femininity of the items is particularly at odds with his male body, he chooses to alter his figure instead. However, on the whole Chris is drawn towards apparel which is more realistic to his own physical attributes.

I thought I'd get a wig to wear now that I'm old and grey. [I laugh as he produces a grey wig] One that is a little... which is actually like my current colour. But I haven't much been wearing it if I'm honest. Tried to take it down round the sides, so it's a bit more unisex. It was a bit too much at the side but uh... it looked a bit too effeminate. But uh... I was going to see if I... [He finishes putting it on] That's more like the colour I am now or will be in a few years' time. So, I thought I might be able to get away with wearing this at home.

Chris's grey wig, which he has altered to make less obviously effeminate, could be worn even in places where his cross-dressing identity (and performed gender) is deemed to be problematic. Picked out for its similarity to his own hair colour, this wig

is an instance of Chris considering the authenticity of his image. Compared to the chest padding, worn in combination with the long and effeminate wig, Chris is performing a (perhaps) more genuine self (Goffman 1990a). This shows that within the space of the self-storage unit Chris can negotiate what he comfortably perceives to be himself, formulating a fluid idealised self between feminine and masculine clothing binaries. The next section of this paper looks more towards how Chris works to make his self-storage unit a comfortable and practical space.

Reproducing home comforts

Displacing one's alternative identity into self-storage takes it out of the situation in which it is judged as 'out of place'. However, given that self-storage is designed and built with the storage and retrieval of possessions in mind, there remains a certain amount of labour to achieving safety, privacy, and comfort in order to create a back-stage space in which 'self-expression' and performance preparations can take place. Some of the spatial practices that Chris described regulate his feelings of comfort by controlling the visibility of his activities and things (Gorman-Murray 2008). Being able to shut his door, and effectively shut himself in the 'closet' is particularly important so that Chris has the privacy to dress, undress and try on clothes without other storage users being able to see his un-clothed or effeminately clothed body. The doors of the unit are not designed to be shut from the inside so Chris had to fashion his own small latch so that he could do so.

I put a little latch on the inside, it's only a trip one [so] if you pulled it, it would open. It's just enough to hold it shut. [...U]nless you actually walk past the door you wouldn't see in, so I could actually have the door open where I am but I've put that little latch. It's only a little bit of loose metal which I've dropped down. [...] It just stops it swinging open of its own accord.

Having the privacy to perform his other(ed) identity, allows Chris to express himself and renders the self-storage unit as a private space, away from a potential hostile gaze. The process of transforming is itself a private act and Chris's unit, more-so than his car, hides his transformation. Aside from privacy, if one is spending an extended period in self-storage unit it needs to be comfortable - which is difficult given its limitations. It was discovered during several interviews in the broader study that the alarms system sometimes does not work and can go off unexpectedly, despite the user logging in at the entrance. This was something that happened during my interview with Chris, as we went to look in his unit together after a long conversation in the staff common room.

[The alarm goes off as soon as Chris goes to open the door to his unit. The sudden sound makes us both jump. As soon as Chris closes the door it turns off.]
I am booked in! Um... I suppose actually they will shut it off when they realise.

[He pulls the door open again and immediately the alarm sounds. After waiting for a few seconds the alarm stops.]

Ah, they've shut it off. [We both exhale]

When you come in at the keypad it, um, alerts, it knows then which unit is going to be open. So as I haven't logged out I assumed it thought I was still in, well it should have thought I was still in.

Dealing with the alarm system is a particular issue for those that are spending longer in their units, and want to shut themselves in. By shutting the door to the unit they risk the alarm going off once more when they reopen it after they have been 'timed out'. The alarm serves to remind Chris that his use of the unit is being monitored and does not fit with 'normal' storage uses, and yet is the best option available to him. However, despite this Chris is 'making a space for oneself – a turf' in self-storage that has characteristics of domestic 'back-stage' closet spaces (Hetherington 1998, 18), as can be read in the below field diary extract.

Chris's unit does not look as I expected. The floor is carpeted with beige-coloured offcuts and light streams in from the large bare window. There are three cloth wardrobes, sagging slightly under the weight of cardboard and plastic boxes that are filled to the brim. A few long pieces of repurposed wood wedge these containers in place above our heads to stop them from falling in. Chris's clothes are roughly sorted onto shelves and clothing racks - those that can't be hung or don't fit inside one of the boxes reside inside large plastic bags. The apparel seems to follow a number of categorisations all at once: type, colour, season, fondness. There is a small clear space in the middle for dressing. A mirror, still in its protective plastic, leans against the only spare bit of wall. It feels much more like a walk-in wardrobe than an industrial storage unit.

– Research diary entry

As well as describing how he had gone about arranging his things, Chris pointed out ways in which he has to alter or curtail his activities in his unit. He is fortunate to have a large window directly in his unit which lights up the room during the day, but it has the unfortunate impact of making some of his clothes fade if left uncovered for long periods of time. Despite this, having the window means that Chris is not dependent on the light coming from the corridor, in the way that closets rely exclusively on light from the bedroom (Urbach 1996, 65). However, during the winter months and in the evenings the light coming in from the window is not sufficient for dressing and undressing, especially when he wants to latch the door shut behind him. To remedy this Chris bought some solar lights which he has stuck up on the mirror. These allow him to continue his activities day and year-round, which is important given the short notice, snatched moments of time he has available to sneak away from home and his wife.

Chris: It should have a brush through it. I don't get much chance to wash them either. I've got some spray which is, sort of, wig oil, which lubricates it so it brushes out a bit better, but I can't remember where it's gone now. [He continues to brush the wig] Still... it's coming slowly.

Chris also laments the lack of running water for him to wash his collection of wigs, which he remedied the best he can with a spray bottle of water to freshen them up. Chris's attempts to clean and maintain his wigs can be understood, through McCracken's (1988) concepts of 'possession' and 'grooming rituals', as an assertion of ownership over his things. His actions have obvious functional purposes but also represent a transfer of meaning between Chris and his possessions. The wigs symbolise being able to cross-dress and perform his other(ed) identity, to transform and temporarily appear as somebody else. The purchase, storage and use of these items has been difficult and remains problematic, so Chris performs these rituals to reinforce his ownership over them. Other objects in the self-storage unit that help Chris to maintain the space, and himself, included a doormat and a very small hand-held vacuum cleaner.

Yes I've carpeted it. Um, ah that's supposed to stay there. [He moves the doormat back into position with his foot]. So I can keep myself all nice and clean and tidy.

These in themselves are objects of maintenance but can also be understood metaphorically. The doormat borders the space outside the unit from the inside, stopping dirt from entering and contaminating the objects within. This is complete opposition to the idea of the closet storing the dirty and profane (Urbach 1996). However, what is also notable is that these 'domestic' objects appear to be out-of-context in Chris's unit. They are fulfilling their purpose, just as they would at a front door or retrieved to Hoover-up crumbs, but their very domesticity makes it more apparent that the self-storage unit is not a domestic space. For those with identities that are 'out of place' and displaced from domestic spaces, self-storage, as a safe space takes on greater significance as a quasi-domestic space. Objects, actions, and practices generally associated with the security, safety, and the production of comfort in the domestic sphere are rooted in this alternate uninhabited space, which in many ways extends the home. Whilst for many the home is secure and private, Chris has to relocate his possessions in order to escape from the confines that home pushes upon him. Despite attempts to make the self-storage unit habitable, it can never be the same as the inhabited space of the home. In some ways, this is helpful, for instance removing self from the context of unacceptance, but in others, such as lack of home comforts, inhibits what can be achieved there.

Conclusion – Self-storage sanctuary

Having seen how self-storage is a transformative and performative space, allowing for 'self-expression' out of place elsewhere, it can be argued that self-storage acts as a sanctuary for those who need it. Silently hostile dynamics exist between Chris and his wife in their home, as well as wider societal expectation, about the performance of 'appropriate' identities (Hollows 2008, 79). His cross-dressing not fitting with her idea of acceptable behaviour, or the heteronormative norms she has internalised. Since Chris's home, whilst arguably is as much his domain as his wife's, is not a suitable space for him to express himself, he feels alienated and trapped in his own home (Manzo 2003; Valentine, Skelton, and Butler 2003). Chris's experiences reinforce the need to disrupt the dominant conceptualisation of home as safe and private (Kearns and Smith 1994). The privacy, safety, and autonomy of the self-storage sanctuary afford individuals the freedom to do what is not possible elsewhere, thereby alleviating stress. Chris described his unit in these terms, repeatedly stating that it was a relief to have his own personal haven, but always caveating by stating that it would not be necessary if his home situation was more forgiving.

By being separated from his usual social and physical environments, Chris could remove those people and objects that defined and restricted his identity. Having a space of his own brought with it freedom *from* constraints and freedom *to* engage in desired activities (and not just from the absence of constraints but the presence of necessary resources and constructive capacity). The privacy of self-storage reduced the need for impression management, since he did not need to conform to or interact with others, and therefore was free to construct and transition between multiple selves/identities. Whilst the unit was far from perfect, he had made it work for him by adding the latch, lights and other 'home comforts'. Conceptualising the self-storage closet as a space within which to hide and from which to reveal identity is important because it raises questions about the extent to which Chris is 'out'. Certainly, given that Chris's cross-dressing largely takes place in the company of strangers or staff at the storage facility and is controlled in order to maintain his secrecy and privacy, it appears that he is still 'in' the closet to the large extent.

In splintering different aspects of his identity, and its material signifiers, spatially between his home and self-storage unit Chris can find the space he needs to try on clothes, and in so doing engage with productive and meaningful identity work. When Chris does come out of the self-storage 'closet' (figuratively and physically) he can perform, liberated in feeling himself. He puts a lot of thought into the impression he wants to make, i.e. more/less effeminate, from the vast repertory for self-expression he has at his disposal. In self-storage, Chris transforms from having a masculine appearance to the somewhere closer to feminine, subverting gendered clothing norms.

Spaces coded for men, locker rooms, garages etc., are places of refuge in which men can find the freedom and privacy needed to perform and express their masculinity, in an (often) exclusively environment of men. In and around the home 'man-caves' act as sanctuaries in which men can (re)create and (re)define their sense of masculinity and social identity. Displacing cross-dressing into self-storage not only removes it from where it is deemed 'out of place', but also takes it out of a space ruled by traditional ideas of gender roles. Self-storage provides privacy, safety, and autonomy, which are fundamental in allowing Chris to experiment with his presentation of gender, enabling him to try on clothes and thus facets of his identity freely.

For other participants in this study, (dis)placed possessions in self-storage related to past or potential future identities which, for whatever reason, were 'out of place' at home either temporarily or more long-term. Putting these items out of sight beyond the visible places of the home meant that they were hidden, but they were not secret. Neither was self-storage a space for the performance of these identities; for most self-storage users' units function more like attics than a walk-in 'closets'. Chris' use of self-storage is considerably different from others in this study but that does not mean his actions are unique. A quick search on cross-dressing forums online and one can find many more stories of individuals dependent on their self-storage sanctuaries. In these situations self-storage is a place to be or become somebody else.

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