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All things degrade: an autoethnographic study of memory and postcards

Abstract

Autobiographical narratives can embed in ‘things’, and the way objects degrade can be used as a way to conceptualise an understanding of the role of memory in storytelling. This piece is an auto-ethnographic essay that hinges around a series of blank art postcards collected by my mother in the early 1980s. These objects provide a way of engaging with the mechanisms of memory through considering the various narratives attached to them, and as material manifestations of the ways we record, remember and forget experiences. This is explored through considering the postcards as a reproduction of the original artworks they depict, as a souvenir of a particular experience, and also as physical objects in their own right. It draws on Walter Benjamin’s writings on materiality and storytelling, Susan Stewart’s writings on nostalgia and the souvenir, as well as anthropological and art historical understandings of materials and their processes of degradation.

Biographical Note

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Keywords

memory – identity – degradation – materiality – narrative

All things degrade

In a small red box tucked between books on my bookshelf, I keep a collection of picture postcards. I didn't buy these cards, nor were they sent to me. Rather, they were collected by my mother in the early 1980s on a trip to Europe, as small mementos or souvenirs from museums she visited and places she had been. With few exceptions the postcards are art postcards, reproductions of famous paintings cropped and scaled to fit on a standard 4-inch by 6-inch piece of card. On the reverse of each card, aside from neatly printed lines demarcating space for an address and a stamp, and the catalogue information of each image, they are completely blank. None of them have been written on, and there are no unsent messages or notes as to why she bought them, just off-white backgrounds that over time have begun to discolour and stain.

These postcards are unremarkable. They are not old enough to have gained value through a sense of nostalgia for a lost aesthetic or printing techniques that have fallen from use. Nor are their images rare or unusual enough to render them of interest to postcard collectors. The persistent blankness of their message side is another point of disinterest; they fail, unlike many postcards, to exist as small archives of correspondence. My mother remembers buying them, but her memories lack any specificity as to why she chose individual cards, except simply that she did. Although I am the one who now keeps them, they aren't often at the forefront of my mind. When I do think about them, however, I find a sense of comfort in knowing they are there. Mostly they just remain hidden, divided between two soft brown envelopes in that small red box.

This collection of postcards was the starting point for a series of interconnected personal essays submitted as part of the requirements of a Master of Creative Writing at the University of Sydney. The collection explores storytelling and material expressions of autobiography through essays focusing on different kinds of ubiquitous objects to touch on both personal and shared experiences of daily life. Walter Benjamin refers to that 'slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed' (2019, p. ix). Drawing on this, the collection of essays aimed to reconstruct a similar approach to layering and accumulation of small moments, objects and experiences in order to construct a kind of autobiography told through a relationship to things and demonstrate the intimate connection between collecting and remembering (Mackovicky, 2007, p. 303).

Through this project I merged research from literary and cultural studies as well as the more disparate fields of heritage and conservation studies, and anthropology. The postcards in particular provided an interesting case study in considering not only the ways in which memories embed in objects, but also the ways in which the physical degradation and ageing of objects contributes to an understanding of the mechanisms of memory and the construction of identity. This essay attempts to provide a critical and theoretical framework for understanding my personal relationship to this set of postcards. Drawing on writings on materiality and the agency of objects, I consider the postcards variously as a reproduction of the original artworks they depict, as a souvenir of a particular experience, and also as physical objects in their own right. Through tracking the material changes incurred by the postcards, alongside the shifting (and competing) sets of memories attached to them, I argue that the postcards provide a material manifestation of the mechanisms of memory and the construction of identity.

The links between objects, memory and identity have been well established across various fields of research, which can be seen in areas of inquiry including New Materialism, Thing Theory, Actor Network Theory and research in conservation and anthropology falling under ‘material turn’. A key premise behind the act of collecting is to acquire objects that will construct particular narratives. This understanding of the collection provided a useful starting point for considering the postcard collection and how I might begin to understand the ways in which it intersected with memory, identity and narrative. According to Stewart, the aim of the collection is to ‘juxtapose personal time with social time, autobiography with history, and thus create a fiction of the individual life’ (1993, p. 154). This sentiment also carries across to much larger and more ambitious collections. National collections, for instance, compile acquired selections of art and artefacts to reflect curated versions of national identity. In the case of personal collections, like my postcards, objects might derive their significance from the tastes and experiences of the collector rather than any inherent material or artistic value, but this doesn’t diminish their capacity to construct particular narratives of identity. Stewart writes about the collection as a form of self-enclosure that ‘replaces history with classification, with order beyond the realm of temporality’ (1994, p. 254). In a sense, the collection attempts to capture something in time – both the material relics and the narratives they represent – but the attempts will always fall short, as the way a collection is understood will always be filtered through the evolving present.

Walter Benjamin’s writings provided me another entry point for considering the connection between collecting and remembering. He writes that ‘collecting is a form of practical memory’ (Benjamin, 1999, p. 205), and for him not only memory, but also history was conceived as being materialised in both objects and the urban landscape (Mackovicky, 2007, p. 291). Benjamin’s understanding of historical materialism was ‘based on the premise that the historian adopts an archaeological method, piecing together an understanding of the past through studying the historical object-world in conjunction with a Marxist understanding of the historical process’ (Mackovicky, 2007, p. 291). Framing the potential significance of objects in this way prompted a consideration of what memories my postcards were intended to hold, of why they had been collected in the first place, and also why they have been kept. One way of approaching these questions was through Benjamin’s proposition that recollections disrupt time, in ‘moments and discontinuities’ (1970, p. 316), a phenomenon that manifests as a physical jolt of memory, a throwback to something not quite remembered. This theory is influenced by Marcel Proust’s notion of *memoire involontaire*, ‘a sudden flash of recognition or correspondence between present and past experiences’ (Mackovicky, 2007, p. 299) encapsulated by the oft-referenced taste of a madeleine in his novel *In Search of Lost Time (Remembrance of Things Past)*, which suddenly and vividly reminds the narrator of a moment in his childhood. For me, this centring of objects and materials provided a framework in which the material nature of the postcards, as card and ink that is degrading over time, could be used as a way of understanding their function as reproductions and souvenirs, and thus as markers of identity.

Benjamin’s writing on storytelling also provided a useful framework in which to consider the links between the making process associated with objects and how this contributes to the retention of memory, and implicitly, identity. He argues that ‘storytelling mirrors a mode of processing and reconstituting experience; it imitates how experiences pass into and out of

memory' (Leslie, 1998, p. 6). He uses pottery as a model and metaphor for the notion of authentic experience, which for Benjamin, who situates himself within a tradition of human anatomical thought, is intrinsically reliant on touch (Leslie, 1998, p. 6). He argues that the experience, memory and context in which the storyteller encountered the story impress into its retelling in much the same way that the potter's hand imprints into a piece of clay. The implication here is that the identity of the storyteller inevitably slips into the story in the same way that the hand of the maker is always present in the objects they craft. For Benjamin, storytelling 'does not aim to transmit the pure, intrinsic nature of the thing like information or a report' rather, 'it plunges the thing into the life of the teller and draws it out again. The storyteller's traces cling to a story the way traces of the potter's hand cling to a clay bowl' as a potter moulds wet clay, the marks of the maker shifting and changing until fixed in place once fired (Benjamin, 2019, p. 56). Although the postcards are mass produced, rendering the process of manufacture somewhat irrelevant in terms of Benjamin's argument, it provides a useful lens for considering the ways in which degradation might be approached and understood as traces of both human intervention and time in terms of conceptualising memory and identity.

Postcards are mass-produced items that do not retain any obvious signs of the hand of the maker, but in the case of my collection they do retain something of the collector, perhaps deriving their relevance and significance from acting as temporal and spatial markers of experience, containing a subtle message of 'I was there'. Bidney draws on both Marx and Stewart to argue that 'the imaginative enhancement of commodities adds a crucial socio-cultural frame to the idea of a fetish or symbolic substitute' (2008, p. 133), which transforms the process of acquisition or consumption into its own kind of identity building as 'the purchaser's self is constituted by the consumption of goods' (p. 114). In collecting even mass-produced items, a process of identity building is being undertaken. Perhaps in a sense, the process of acquisition can be seen as parallel to the processes of making as outlined by Benjamin. Although the traces of the collector might not be so physically apparent on the surfaces of those objects they choose to collect, this does not necessarily diminish the capacity of such objects to tell a story.

In trying to unpack the meanings and narratives attached to my own collection of postcards, it is worth considering the history of postcards more generally. Originating in the mid-19th century as plain cards with one side reserved for the address of the recipient and the other for a short message, they were initially introduced as an economic way to send brief business messages by post (Cure, 2018, p. 6). Initially met with resistance, the popularity of these cards was unexpected and widespread, far outperforming the postal services' hesitant outlook for their uptake and use (p. 8). The concurrent developments in photographic imaging and reproduction techniques and a burgeoning tourist market led to the gradual inclusion of images on postcards (p. 14), until eventually the images took over the entire blank side of the card, with the reverse split down the middle with space for a message and the address that is familiar today.

By the late 19th century, the popularity of picture postcards was being described as a craze that included not only the sending of postcards, but also their collection (Cure, 2018, p. 157). Aside from appealing to a longing for colourful images and mass tourism, postcards also satisfied the collecting interests of women, who up until this point had few opportunities to engage in the

act of collecting (Rogan, 2005, p. 3). Postcards would be displayed in folders and exchanges were facilitated by postcard collection clubs (some exclusively for women) and published language guides, containing stock sentences to be used in postcard correspondence, which would allow collectors to communicate with each other despite existing language barriers and expand their collections. In some instances, travellers would even send postcards to acquaintances back home with the tacit understanding that they would be given the postcard back upon their return so that it could be added to their own collection. The act of posting the card lent it an air of authenticity, an indexical quality that came not only from its association with photography, but also its association with place (Cure, 2018, p. 176).

Cure notes that ‘one of the fascinating things about the postcard as collectible is the way its use value as mode of communication haunted it’ (2018, p. 158), that even as the postcard collection attempted to catalogue the world, it constantly signalled the desire for the world to speak back (p. 158). I think about this haunting in relation to my mother’s postcards. Although they were never posted, they retain an indexical quality in which traces of my mother’s travels, her presence in certain European cities and at various galleries is subtly recorded and preserved. The details of these travels are, however, admittedly murky. By looking at the cards, it is not hard to figure out which cities or museums were visited – the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Louvre in Paris and the Munch Museum in Oslo are just three examples – but the cards do not betray much more information than that. Interestingly my mother no longer remembers much more about buying them than these simple facts. The gap between the experiences they represent and the memories has widened to a point that the experience itself has been replaced by the postcards, flattened into something that can be summed up in a sentence, or slipped into an envelope and stored away.

The postcards I keep form a kind of collection although their specific narrative is difficult to distil. On one level, they function as reproductions of the artworks they depict, capturing them each at a moment in time (mostly 1979 according to the catalogue information printed on the reverse), in which the original works are cropped and flattened, portraying, as articulated by the writer Anna Sanderson in her essay on picture postcards, ‘different substances [with] equal degrees of solidity (2007, 50). For my mother they are travel souvenirs, reminders of places she went and paintings she saw. For me they are something more complex. They are reminders of childhood, and an introduction to travel and art, both of which I experienced second hand. They are also physical objects, cheap cardstock printed with miniscule swirling dots that have aged since I first encountered them, their colours shifting and fading.

Drawing on Heidegger’s distinction between objects and things, Bill Brown writes that ‘we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature or culture – above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things’ (2001, p. 4). As the postcards age, pulling further away from the moment in time that the images were taken, and subsequently collected, their colours fading in tandem with memory, they become less representative of the moment they were created and collected to maintain. This process of temporal and spatial removal from experience is something Stewart considers. She writes that in this process of distancing, the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, which is always to some extent unknowable (Stewart, 1993, p. 133). My mother no longer recalls the specificity of her experiences purchasing the postcards, and even if she did, that experience would necessarily be relayed to me second hand. Similarly, I no longer remember my own experiences of first encountering them. I simply remember that they were always there

and they remind me insistently, and perhaps somewhat incongruously, of the house I grew up in.

Cognitive archaeologists Lambros Malafouris and Colin Renfrew note that ‘things are very good-to-think-with or through, but not so good-to-think-about. The more time you spend thinking about things, the less of a thing and the more of an object or category they become’ (Malafouris & Renfrew in Stockhammer, 2020, p. 39). Over time, the lack of narrative specificity has rendered this collection of postcards as both saturated in, and in a way bereft of, meaning; as Cure notes, ‘rather than providing a comprehensive world picture through an infinite number of postcards...postcards made the world illegible’ (2018, p. 30). What remains is a narrative that is highly malleable, that changes and shifts over time. For Frow, ‘the true role of things, of underlying thingness, is to be the mirror of our souls, the object that makes us a subject, that makes us real’ (2001, p. 272). Perhaps in watching these postcards slowly degrade, they also mirror the process of remembering and forgetting.

Each time I look at my postcards, I am convinced that they are slightly different. Although this must in part be a quirk of memory, it is also likely because they are changing, albeit slowly. Tim Ingold writes that objects do not exist, rather they occur (2007, p. 14). In the essay ‘Materials against materiality’, Ingold argues that the forms of things are continually generated and dissolved by virtue of existing in the world, and that the properties of materials are not fixed, but rather ‘processual and relational’ (p. 14). This process of occurring is linked both to the changing physical qualities ‘pulsing with the flows of materials that keep them alive’ (p. 13), and human perception, noting that ‘like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on the “other side” of materiality but swim in an ocean of materials’ (p. 7). Paper degrades and ink fades, and the way we perceive materials inevitably shifts over time as ‘things transform and impact the specific way in which reality discloses itself’ (Kirchhoff, 2009, p. 206). The cardboard of these postcards has now yellowed, and the colours of the printing inks have shifted so that there is a soft blue cast over each painting that isn’t there on the original. These cards contain vital materiality that I imagine as a kind of imperceptible shimmering or pulsing, as even when the world seems still, it is in a constant state of flux.

The archaeologist Philipp Stockhammer outlines what he refers to as three ‘changeabilities’ of material culture to understand the ways in which humans and things encounter and change each other. The first changeability is a change in perception. He notes that when we think about things or interact with them, we usually perceive them as stable and static; however, our perception of things is permanently changing, so the thing itself changes, even if just in our perception (Stockhammer, 2020, p. 39). The second changeability is related to the impact of time on an object causing the materials to change without explicit human intervention (p. 41). In the case of my postcards this could be seen in the way the inks have faded and the card has discoloured. The third changeability is directly related to human intervention. It refers to breakages, creases, scuffs and stains, damage caused directly by someone’s hand (p. 42). Stockhammer notes that ‘these traces of use have the potential to become witnesses of past times and anchors of memory, which can serve as a basis for the creation of meanings and histories’ (p. 42). Interestingly, as another archaeologist, Robert Mills, points out, in the 19th century, the term ‘memories’ was used to describe the damage to objects that reduced their value in pawn shops, physical traces of the past lives of those objects (2016, p. 81). Although

the third changeability might provide the most tangible links to past experiences, Stockhammer argues that the first two ‘changeabilities’ have the potential to ‘sharpen our focus on the inherent dynamics of a thing and its changes over time’ (2020, p. 47). This is important in understanding the way an object functions temporally. This is particularly pertinent in relation to research in materials conservation and heritage architecture that aims to articulate the significance of degradation in terms of objects and the construction of identity.

Heritage architect Jorge Otero-Pailos contends that particularly due to limitations of memory, a sense of identity is always ungraspable without objects upon which a narrative of identity might hinge. In a conversation with art and conservation theorist Hanna Hölling, he states, ‘we don’t know who we are for the most part, we don’t remember significant events in our lives...so we actually are constantly trying to retell ourselves the story of who we are...we use all sorts of objects in order to recall who we are’ (Otero-Pailos & Hölling, 2019, p. 258). The way objects change over time is also fundamental to this process. Otero-Pailos notes that our obsession with the decay of objects and their patinas is because this ‘provides us with a kind of experiential continuity with the past’ (p. 258). Thus, the visual signs of ageing materials, of faded colours and degrading surfaces provides us not only with a link to memories that are important in the construction of identity, but also add a temporal aspect to this experience, allowing us to comprehend that we ourselves are moving through time.

Our experience of the past is always mediated by the present. My perception of the postcards has shifted over the years, in tandem with the material changes they have undergone. As a child they symbolised something distant and beyond my direct experience, which endowed them with a sense of significance. This dimmed as I got older and realised how ubiquitous art postcards and overseas travel are. However, as my perceptions have shifted, these earlier naïve associations have now become part of the meaning I ascribe to them, adding another layer of memories to these objects that is indirectly mirrored in the physical aspects of how they have aged. Hölling argues, ‘the past and the present that has been coexist, but the past also preserves itself endlessly within itself, while the present passes’ (2017, p. 5). This can be seen in the physical changes of objects, the way each material alteration is linked directly to choices made during the making process, or in the way it has been subsequently cared for (or not). However, it is also linked to the layering of memories that each rendition of the past leaves behind. In a sense, a parallel can be drawn between Cure’s haunting of postcards by their intended function, and the ways in which the past haunts the present (Eggert, 2019, p. 67).

In a way, my postcards exist as material objects that physically change over time, while also existing as a series of iterations through memory. Implicit in their current state are memories of how they looked when they were newer and less faded. The fact that these memories are likely inaccurate, as much fantasy as reality, is secondary to the constant reminder that these postcards have changed, and will continue to change. Perception is also key here as material traces of the past inevitably linger, yet the way these are perceived cannot be separated from our current context. In tandem with the knowledge that these postcards are in a constant state of material flux is the tacit acknowledgment that my perceptions of them have also changed and will continue to change over time. As objects that were bought as mementos linked spatially and temporally to particular experiences of travel, and as objects that have and continue to degrade, their meaning continually shifts. These postcards function as ‘material sedimentations of past lives whose meaning is delayed’ (Rigney in Zirra, 2017, p. 61) that straddle both present and past in a constant state of becoming.

For whatever else they have come to mean to me, the postcards in my collection are first and foremost my mother's souvenirs, and as such they were always meant to serve as reminders of a much larger, more complex experience – a period of travel that spanned multiple countries and several years. Susan Stewart writes about the souvenir as an internalisation of an external experience, the moving of an experience from an event to a memory (1993, p. 135). It is perhaps not surprising that my mother doesn't remember the specifics of buying them, or why she chose a particular card over another. As a collection they have come to stand in for an experience much larger than the individual moments in which they would have been bought constructing a 'continuous and personal narrative of the past' (Stewart, 1993, p. 140).

It has been suggested that postcards were amongst the first souvenirs. At the 1878 World's Fair in Paris, postcards featuring images of the Eiffel Tower could be stamped and posted from one of three platforms on the tower, recording the location of the sender and thus 'fusing personal, handwritten messages to a larger narrative' (Cure, 2018, p. 14). For a postcard to be truly authentic as a souvenir, however, it had to both be purchased in the place it was depicted and also sent from there (p. 195). I have wondered if the fact my mother's postcards were never sent has somehow compromised their authenticity. They lack various material elements like stamps and written messages, that might make them easier to interpret, yet I think their blankness makes them more interesting to me in that their exact function is slippery somehow. Perhaps this is what Benjamin meant when he wrote about objects being 'freed from the drudgery of being useful in order to evoke a world that is...distant and long gone' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 19).

The one thing I am most certain of when I look at my postcards is that they elicit a sense of nostalgia. The term nostalgia derives from the Greek 'nostos' meaning 'to return home', and 'lagos' which means 'pain, and was coined in the 17th century by the Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer. It was a term initially used to describe an intense kind of homesickness experienced by Swiss mercenaries who missed home with a pathological intensity (Trigg, 2006, p. 53). Hofer described the experience as 'a continuous vibration of animal spirits through those fibres of the middle brain in which the impressed traces of the idea of the Fatherland still cling' (1934, p. 45). In writing about the aesthetics of decay, Trigg notes that 'the dynamic of past and present gradually becoming disunited is central to nostalgia, since the attraction of nostalgia structurally depends on an image of the past that is fixed in the present' (2006, p. 56). This resonates with Hölling's assertion that our experience of time is 'based on the idea of a present involving a past and an anticipation for the future' (2017, p. 4).

The paradox of nostalgia is that it 'corresponds with the past, but only insofar as it replicates the past and forgets it' (Trigg, 2006, p. 245). This would go some way to explain the mechanism of memory at play with souvenirs, as the object necessarily sheds its specificity as it comes to stand in for a broader experience. This corresponds to the ability of postcards to flatten experience, compressing it as details of memory fade over time, allowing complex experiences to be contained in a sentence, or a stand-in image. It also implies that nostalgia is an experience grounded in the present, through which the recollections of the past might be filtered. Stewart engages with this merging of past and present suggesting that the double function of the souvenir is to authenticate the past, which, when contained in the memories associated with the

souvenir is intimate and direct, while discrediting the present, which is comparatively too impersonal and looming (1993, p. 139).

Rebecca Solnit writes about this gap between past and present, distance and nearness, of the known and the unknown in her essay 'The Blue of Distance'. For Solnit, the blue of distance is 'the colour of there seen from here, the colour of where you are not. And the colour of where you can never go' (2005, p. 29). It is the physical manifestation of longing for both a spatial and temporal distance, something that is inherently inaccessible or unknowable, whether a distant place, time, or even person. She writes about material representations of this notion through the optical effect of atmospheric perspective in painting, whereby the illusion of depth is constructed by means of a gradual transition from warm to bluish hues (Quiviger, 2010, p. 102), a technique that became popular amongst European Renaissance painters. Solnit notes that Leonardo Da Vinci is known to have instructed his pupils to represent the air as dense, creating perspective through mixing realistic colours with shades of blue until the horizon was a hazy blue band in the distance (2005, p. 33). For Solnit desire is reliant on distance, as it is an emotional state that can only exist while the gap between longing for and possessing something remains open or unresolved.

My collection of postcards contains an image of the *Mona Lisa*, Da Vinci's most famous work. On the original painting, which hangs in the Louvre, the blue band of atmospheric perspective at the horizon has discoloured over the centuries. Thick layers of yellowed varnish have rendered it a murky green. The colours in my mother's postcard have altered over the years too, albeit differently, as the printing inks have shifted and faded. On the postcard, this same band now looks like a wisp of bright blue. This material change is a physical manifestation of the temporal gap between when this postcard was bought and now, transforming the spatial distance of longing expressed through atmospheric perspective, into a reflection of temporal experience, of years passing, memories fading, and the subtle shifts in identity that inevitably occur as we age. The divergence between the original painting and the postcard visualises the gap between memory and past experience, and that sense of longing for something that never really was, that defines nostalgia.

In giving me these souvenirs, my mother shared aspects of the narrative and experience that they represented for her. Stewart writes that 'we cannot be proud of someone else's souvenir unless the narrative is extended to include our relationship with the object's owner or unless...we transform the souvenir into the collection' (1993, p. 137). Perhaps both of these things are at play with my postcards, as I have created my own set of experiences on top of those of my mother, and built my own narratives around them in which they signify a child-like sense of wonder for places and things beyond the everyday, as well as more implicitly an appreciation for the way perception and memory shift, and how these contribute to the ever-evolving process of constructing identity. Rigney writes that 'materialities have a role to play in the production of memory, triggering and shaping recollection and linking people to each other across generations' (2017, p. 474). One of the strongest associations I have with them now is my childhood home, of sitting in my bedroom and fanning the cards out across the floor. When I did this, the postcards were still more my mother's than mine. I was allowed to play with them, but not to keep them, perhaps an indication that the gap between the act of collection and my mother's memories of them was small enough to render them more precious to her than they are now. To me, the act of fanning them out, of playing with them, encompassed a kind of nostalgia, for an experience my mother had but I never could. The motion of playing with

the cards in this way also became part of my own engagement with these objects, feeding into my own narrative of longing for distant places and a curiosity about the world, as well as acting as a reminder of the house I grew up in, ‘conserved in me in fragmentary form’ (Bachelard, 1994, p. 57). My mother never formally gifted me the postcards. Over time, they simply came to mean more to me than they did to her, so I kept them.

Another layer of temporal meaning is imbued in the postcards as they exist as reproductions. They were made to record and disseminate an original work of art, each one part of a series of thousands of copies that could literally be anywhere by now, spread throughout the world. The privileging of originality is a relatively recent phenomenon. As noted by Lowenthal, well into the 19th century, copying was considered essential, as copies ‘diffused good taste, instructed the public eye, and improved the arts while enhancing the prototype’ (2019, p. 32). Although copies lack what Benjamin describes as the ‘aura’ of the original, they implicitly confirm the existence of an original. This is particularly pronounced in the case of art postcards, which ‘reinforce the iconic status of the works of art in a museum’s collection’ (Cure, 2018, p. 207). Although postcards can be easily collected, they signal the untouchable status of the original (p. 207).

When I looked at these postcards as a child, there was a sense of being let into a world of art that always seemed so distant from the southern suburbs of Sydney. The printed names of museums on their backs fit in neatly with grand narratives of art history that I slowly learnt about at school, but that never felt entirely real. In some ways the diminutive size of the postcards relative to the much larger original works lent them qualities of the miniature as inherently toy-like, ‘a device for fantasy, a point of beginning for narrative that opens an interior world’ (Bidney, 2008, p. 122). In a way, perhaps this quality invited an implicit understanding that these postcards could both contain and prompt narratives through imagination and play. Later on, there may have been the inverse of this too as I went to art school and tried to forget about them, the paintings on them that I had loved for so long suddenly embarrassingly conventional. This aligns with Stewart’s description of the fictive nature of childhood memories, ‘distanced, diminutive and clearly framed’ (1993, p. 44).

Reproduction in the form of postcards also fragments the originals, reducing them to a flattened impression that privileges one particular aspect of their materiality above all others. All of the postcards in my collection, and in fact most art postcards, depict the work of art front on, often cropping away extraneous details like the frame or the walls on which a painting might be hung. Little attention is paid to capturing a sense of texture or gloss, and elements such as smell and the physical presence something might take in a room are completely lost when the image is printed on cardboard. Lowenthal notes that fragments activate myriad connections between what is and what was, suggesting the existence of a more nuanced and full original (2019, p. 26). In this sense there is another kind of haunting apparent in my postcards, as they imply a past state from which they as copies have originated (Lowenthal, 2019, p. 27) and also suggest that some version of this must surely still exist. By now I have visited most of the museums my mother visited on her trip and I have seen almost all of the paintings the postcards depict. Each time I have seen one I feel a strange sense of regret, a dull throbbing of disappointment that I cannot explain. Interestingly, Lowenthal explains that copies that begin as a ‘surrogate for material entities...may be preferred to them’ as ‘confronting memory with physical reality

often disappoints' (2019, p. 44). Perhaps the original paintings, their meanings too defined and fixed, will always pale compared to the stories I have constructed around my fragmented copies.

The original paintings reproduced in my postcards have changed since these photographs were taken and printed and sold. Paint cracks and colours fade. They also capture what might be considered a particular iteration of the original, as documented in a particular place and time. There is a class of fugitive pigments, mostly reds, of dyes precipitated with another material to form a solid. These pigments fade so rapidly that some artists were known for painting portraits that aged alongside their sitters as the pinks of their painted cheeks turned to a ghostly pallor. In a postcard of flowers painted by Vincent van Gogh, the colours have shifted tonally over the years. Areas of violet captured in my postcard, now appear as blue, as the red pigment has slowly faded from sight. When I think about this, it is as though the painting and its reproduction diverged at the very point it was photographed in order to preserve it. The postcard is a captured moment frozen in time that now ages, independently, in its own way.

There are any number of ways in which narrative might be distilled from a collection of blank postcards. In privileging their material aspect, a focus on the mechanisms of degradation and the ways in which they have changed over time allowed me to reflect on the capacity of objects to not only hold memories, but reflect memory and identity as being in a constant state of development and flux. Benjamin and Stewart's writings on materiality provided a useful starting point to begin to contemplate the links between narrative, identity and objects. This was supplemented by research in anthropology and cultural heritage studies, which provided further frameworks of making sense of the intrinsic links between collecting, material degradation and identity.

No doubt the postcards will continue to change. As I, too, continue to change, so will my perception of them. The postcards and I continually re-enacting Hölling's assertion that the 'past preserves itself endlessly within itself while the present passes' (2017, p. 5). The temporal distance between the present and each layer of the past creates a space for longing, for desiring something that cannot be possessed. Yet it also provides space for narratives. This exercise, then, will function as another layer in the narrative I have constructed around the postcards. They are as much a part of my story now as they are of my mother's. Perhaps the appeal of nostalgia is as much a longing for a simplified version of ourselves as for a (mis)remembered past, for as Solnit notes, 'we hardly know our own depths' (2005, p. 31).

It is unlikely that if anyone else were to look at these postcards that they would be able to decipher their significance to me, in much the same way that I can only really imagine the experiences that they signify for my mother. The narrative I encounter in them is particular to me and a product of my perception and experiences. In considering objects from the perspective of degradation and change, there is also a tacit acknowledgment that all things come to an end. Benjamin writes that 'memories can certainly be left behind – but they don't always find an heir' (2019, p. 63). Not all stories need to be remembered, but an engagement with objects reminds us of who we are and who we have been.

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