

ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVES: HISTORIES IN CIRCULATION

Shalmali Shetty | MLitt Curatorial Practice (Contemporary Art), 2019-20
Placement Supervisor: Jenny Brownrigg, Director, Glasgow School of Art Exhibitions

The work placement with Jenny Brownrigg, Director, Glasgow School of Art Exhibitions, involved Shalmali Shetty in the preparation towards the group exhibition and accompanying symposium entitled Practicing Landscape: Land, Histories and Transformation [1]. Additionally, Shetty was engaged in research for the New York-based artist Kameelah Janan Rasheed's show that would have been hosted by GSA Exhibitions during GI 2020. While working on these various projects, Shetty's interests were drawn to themes of material time, memory and material objects.

INTRODUCTION

Shalmali Shetty was especially interested in the works of Jenny Brownrigg amongst others like Michail Mersinis, which were part of the exhibition. Brownrigg showcased a collection of eight postcards and a brochure titled 'A Day in Edinburgh' (1934, Grant & Murray), that she purchased on eBay. Brownrigg has been working on thirteen women photographers and filmmakers of the early 20th century from across Scotland as part of her own research around undocumented women's histories. This particular collection comprises original photographs produced as postcards in the early 1900s by Violet Banks (1886-1985), an Edinburgh-based photographer.

METHODOLOGY | ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Shetty's research interests were further expanded on handling Brownrigg's series of postcards. What additionally captured Shetty's attention were the handwritten notes in the verso. They delineated a past when the circulation of postcards was prevalent, with short messages exchanged between people: in remembrance of each other, and in memory of a time, space and emotions experienced across geographies. Writing about 'archival autoethnography'

Dydia DeLyser elucidates, 'regardless of their lack of monetary value or cultural capital, these objects can be (inter)personally engaged to uncover intimate geographies of social memory that link tourists to the places they visit, connecting their lives personally to the broader social narratives those places relate.' [2]

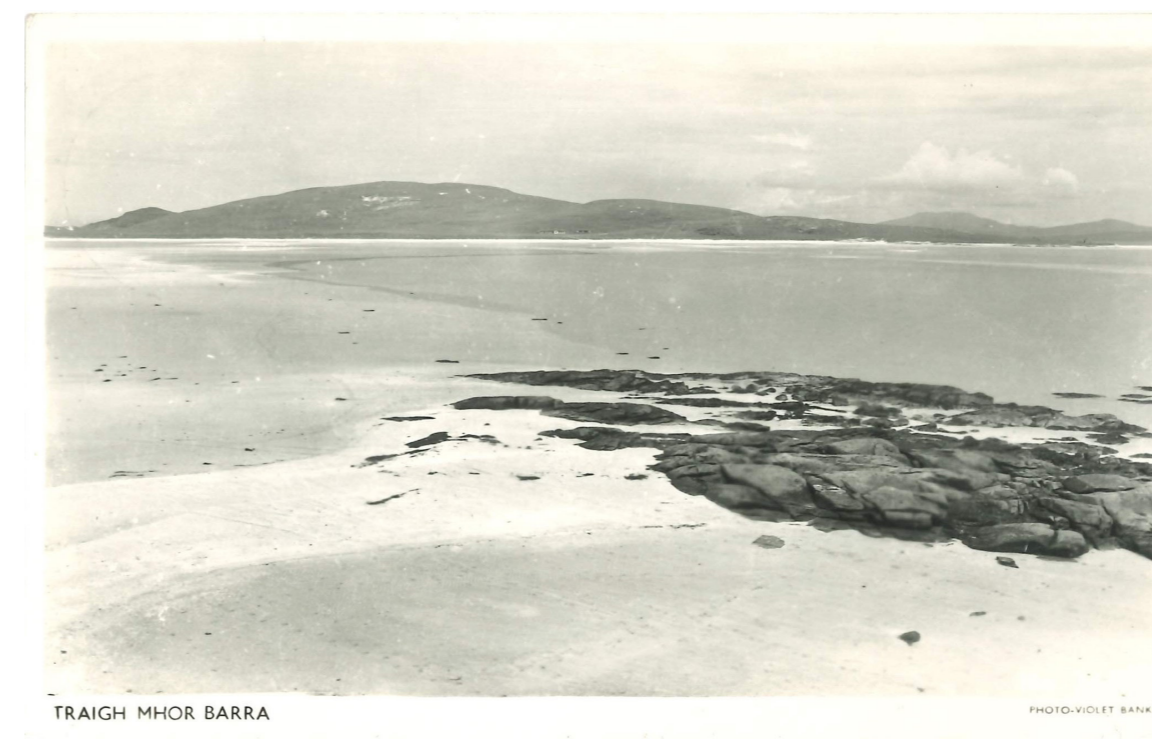
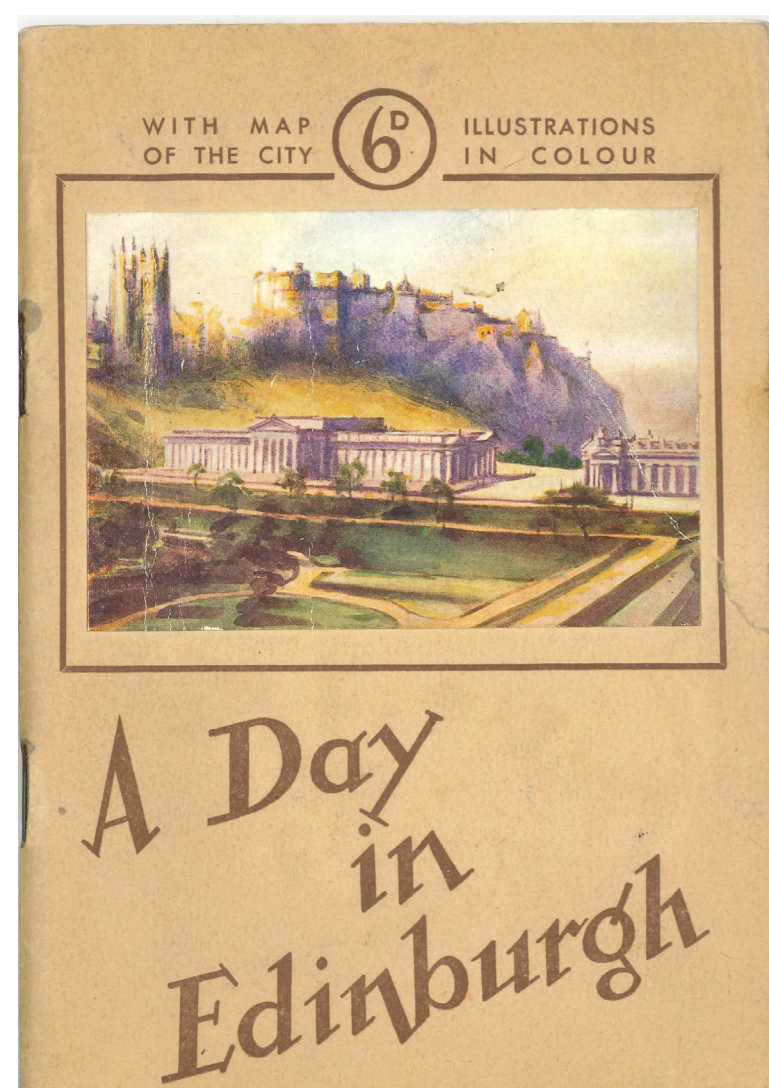
Having purchased the collection of postcards and the brochure on eBay, Brownrigg notes how this process of locating these material histories online is itself "an action mirroring the precarity of women's work in archives." [3] This further got me interested in eBay as a platform that enables the easy circulation of such items between interested collectors. With classifieds such as *Loot* that were prevalent in the UK before the shift to technological convenience, buying and selling happened on a much smaller scale and within national boundaries. But the advancements in digital technology has now enabled and expanded global circulation of material objects. DeLyser illustrates how the 'internet and particularly online auctioning has made such personal collections easier to amass, transforming the personal and professional geographies of collectibles acquisition and sale' [4] and in the process 'constructing what I (*sic*) term intimate spatialities of social memory.' [5]

CONCLUSION

Online platforms such as eBay established with the sole intention of easing global commercial exchange with their goods, have inadvertently enabled the scope for research and discussions around personal and unaccounted social histories beyond the capacities of institutions and museums - that may come with their own set of political agendas and limitations to collecting. Further, handwritten notes act as textual evidence over and above material evidence (here, both contained within the postcards, accompanied by real or fictitious photographic evidence) relaying different kinds of information - of people and environments, allowing for various interpretations of the past in the present context. [6]

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

- [1] <https://readingthelandscape.wordpress.com/> and <http://www.gsa.ac.uk/life/gsa-events/events/p/practicing-landscapeland,-histories-and-transformation/?source=current>
- [2] Dydia DeLyser, *Collecting, kitsch and the intimate geographies of social memory: a story of archival autoethnography*. Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers: 2014 (pg. 209) <https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/tran.12070>
- [3] Jenny Brownrigg, *Practicing Landscape: Land, Histories and Transformation*; Exhibition interpretation text: 2020.
- [4] Dydia DeLyser, (pg. 210)
- [5] *Ibid.* (pg. 210)
- [6] An interesting story posted by an eBay user: <https://community.ebay.com/t5/Archive-Selling/I-have-kind-of-an-amazing-story-to-tell/td-p/25430338>



Clockwise from Left: Brochure entitled *A Day in Edinburgh* (Grant and Murray, 1934); Installation shot of postcards and brochure: Jenny Brownrigg, *Practicing Landscape*, 2020; Postcards: Violet Banks, early 20th century.

Images 1, 3 & 4, courtesy of Jenny Brownrigg, Glasgow; Image 2, photo: Jack McCombe, courtesy of GSA Exhibitions.