

**Collapsing Distance: A Correspondence**  
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Thesis submitted to the faculty of Columbia College Chicago  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts  
in Interdisciplinary Book and Paper Arts

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May 14, 2020

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Dedicated to The Arts Centre Te Matatiki Toi Ora  
*for continually demonstrating that the creation of exquisitely beautiful objects is both possible  
and wise.*

The bus route “Purple Line: Airport to University.” seems to summarize my life as well, as I find myself shuttling between places of education and those of travel or transformation. It also more or less summarizes what this project is about. The metaphor of life or labor as a journey is overused, but nevertheless proves useful here. Both projects and journeys benefit from –and often directly rely on– substantial help from others. To all of those who helped me in small and large ways, thank you.

To my high school art teachers:

**Robyn Webster** and **Ross Dunn** for teaching a range of art methods and histories in an impassioned and unbiased way, and ultimately teaching me that tradition is a living thing.

To my thesis advisors:

**Paul Catanese**, for believing and advocating for the vast expanse that is interdisciplinarity

**Mel Potter**, for not only getting me to *make* paper, but also to *write* papers

**Brad Freeman**, for being singularly interesting enough to make me come back to Columbia, and, of course, for the transcendental experience at CalRBS.

To all my classmates at Columbia College, for their companionship and insights, especially to:

**Maria VanDyken Li**, for her everyday kindness and reliability

**Julia Arredondo**, for always starting something, and thus lifting the spirits in quarantine.

**Andrew Shoemaker**, for putting the *fun* in nonfunctional art, and for being the best second shift

to **Viktor Le. Givens**, for graciously offering a single suggestion that untangled the entire project

to **Ali Schiffner** for meticulous measurements, & confidently capturing the concept in diagram

to the women of Farm Road Flat 16, for freely offering hospitality in humility and sincerity, in my hour of desperate need.

to **Jeff Abell**, for showing me that there were still more ideas to try

to **Kevin Moore**, for watering this idea when it was just a seed.

to **Niki Nolin**, for teaching, but especially for being a gentle neighbour.

to **Bob Blandford** for being willing to believe I'm a boss.

to **Tracie Hall** and **Rhonda Wheatley**, for sharing not only their gorgeous work, but their worldviews

to my grandfather **John G. Raffensperger** for financially supporting my graduate education

to the **Barbara Lazarus Metz** family. My tuition was partially funded by their Endowed Fellowship.

to **The Albert P. Weisman** family. This project was partially funded by The Albert P. Weisman Award, a private trust of Columbia College Chicago.

to my **parents** and **grandparents**, for loving to make things for me and with me, and for loving the things I make. But most of all, of course, for loving me.

to **Tom**. How can a single sentence summarize your contribution, or properly express my gratitude? ♥

to **Chicago**, for a spirit of inventiveness and resilience, as exemplified in the Fire and the Fair.

to **Los Angeles County**, for (for lack of a better term) hosting me my whole life.

to the 74 members of Urban Search and Rescue **CA-TF2** who served at the CTV tower.

to the **Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū** for being resilient enough, even during crisis to double as the Civil Defence Headquarters. May this flexibility be cultivated in me as well.

to **Bryan Lair**, for calling me when there was a problem

to my father-in-law, for answering a call when there was a big problem

to **Dr. Roger Packer** at PBTC for developing an effective treatment for medulloblastoma.

and especially to **Dr. Rosado**, for his incarnational ministry in and among us.

To Ōtautahi

*auē te aroha te mamae i ahau e  
rū ana te whenua, whati ana te moana  
pā mai tō reo aroha, ki runga i te whenua e  
kia kaha! kia toa! kia manawanui  
kua tū mokemoke tātou, kua tū pani auē*

### Artist's Biography

Rebecca Grace Hill is an American interdisciplinary practitioner, whose work focuses on resilience and reframing personal narratives, especially ones of grief, pain, or loss. Rebecca's creative ethos draws from a variety of craft values, including the DIY ethic and creative reuse. In the studio, Rebecca works with collage, assemblage, and installation, using materials such as ephemera and previously unloved objects. When brought together these items are able to tell new stories of hope and transformation. She has spent a good portion of her life in New Zealand, and currently lives in Chicagoland, a few miles from where she was born.

### Project Statement

*Collapsing Distance: A Correspondance* is an autobiographical 30-year narrative that explores meaningful places, significant life events, and the connections and synchronicities among these. Materially, it is a 30-foot installation of mailboxes arrayed linearly, as if they were for houses on the same street. Each of seven mailboxes is stuffed with a number of physical objects, and each object will act like a puzzle piece – when observed together they tell the story of the first thirty years of my life. The project examines the impact of increased mobility and globalization, and proposes material objects as as a tool for resilience.

Keywords: Collage, assemblage, travel, postcard, object art, synchronicity

## Introduction

*Collapsing Distance* is an autobiographical narrative about significant events and places in the first 30 years of my life, told in a nonlinear way. This narrative is experienced materially and tangibly through an installation of seven mail boxes. Each mailbox is stuffed with a number of small folded collages presented in envelopes. Observers are invited to become participants through interacting with the installation. This work is an interdisciplinary project that rests at the intersection of an array of historic and contemporary social trends and creative practices. It is positioned in relation to contemporary trends in the greeting card industry, interdisciplinary practices and cultural work. The project acknowledges the sociological trend towards increased mobility and globalization, and the impact this has had on my story. It recognizes the significance of material objects, and the ways in which they can activate memory, and provide tools of meaning-making and resilience.

This project is a material investigation of life's meaningful events, their occurrences, causes and consequences, as examined through the lens of reality refracted through memory, and presented as greeting cards. This project explores questions of significance and synchronicity, as events appear to meaningfully occur together in space and time, place and rhythm, over and over, defining the present and determining the futures. Both collective and individual defining moments are studied together, to reveal the continual conjunction of events by which I identify myself both personally and publicly. Consideration is given to the overlapping and stacking nature of events as they layer on top of one another, coincidentally, sequentially, intentionally, and consequentially into the pasted-together narrative which is life.

Not every week of my life has something noteworthy going on. It so happened, however, that the third weekend of February, 2011 was a little more remarkable than usual. That week I was planning to attend a retreat in the North Woods over the weekend. On Wednesday I got an email from my mom in Christchurch, New Zealand, saying that she would be going to Chicago that weekend to visit her sister who was dying of cancer. Since I was already made plans for a trip, it was easy to adapt them and go to Chicago instead. I arrived by bus early in the morning, and we spent Saturday visiting my dying aunt. The next day, we visited my brother at his house, the house where my crush lived, too. When he opened the door I knew something was very wrong. By the end of the night I learned the man I loved had brain cancer. The next day I was stranded in Chicago because there was a recordbreaking snowstorm in Minnesota. This stroke of fate, or providence meant that my mom and I were together that evening when we received the news that there had been a massive earthquake in Christchurch.

Each of these events is powerful in their own right, and by themselves can shape the future of those affected. What is the overall impact when these sorts of events are constellated together, repeatedly?

## Causality and Synchronicity

Scottish philosopher David Hume held the position that causation, when properly understood, was nothing more than a *constant conjunction* of events. Causation, he argued, cannot be seen firsthand, all that can be observed is two events co-occurring together over and over again in time. Since all we have are our observations of the past, and we cannot use deduction to figure out the future, Hume argued that any other definition of "causality" a departure from deductive reasoning and instead relied upon induction. For causality to make sense, we must take an inductive leap and *assume* that the future will be like the past. Bertrand Russell famously illustrates danger of this way of thinking by telling a story about a happy turkey that gets fed every day by a farmer, and so erroneously assumes life will continue in this delightful manner, only to find his neck rung by the same farmer on Thanksgiving Day (Chalmers pg 14).

Around two hundred years later, Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung was also unsatisfied with the limitations of causality as an explanatory factor, and proposed the idea of an "acausal organizing

principle” which he called *synchronicity* and explored in a book of the same name. In his practice he observed many instances of two events co-occurring near in time that could not have had a causal connection but were recognized as meaningful by observers. One such example he provides is the case of a patient who was struggling to make progress in psychotherapy, who one night dreamed that someone gave her a golden beetle and solved her problem. At the moment she recounted this story to Jung in therapy there was mysterious tapping at the window, which when opened revealed a golden beetle who flew into the room with them. Jung was able to present the beetle to the patient who then was able to make therapeutic progress in leaps and bounds (22).

Both of these views ask the reader to consider what it means when two noteworthy events occur beside each other in time, and not only that but also over again in time. My project asks this of the viewer as well. What sort of meaning can be found in the juxtaposition of events, and how can we make sense of similar events repeating in time?

### **Process**

My creative process, although cyclical in nature, could be said to begin with the discovery and acquisition of materials. These materials include books, various types of loose paper (including handmade papers), printed matter, postage stamps, ephemeral materials such as paper bags, labels or tags, postcards and greeting cards, or handwriting notes. Each of these can be found in a variety of places, from the side of the road, to one's own mailbox or junk drawer, as well as at book sales, thrift or antique shops or specialty retailers. Once these materials are collected, I typically sort them into loose categories. Items may be separated based on the type of item (interesting blank paper), the size (anything bigger than a standard sheet of paper versus things smaller than a postage stamp), or by a theme. One theme I often sort by is Place or Location – so all the materials that make reference to California are kept together, and the ones about Chicago are kept together, and so on. Other themes include the sciences, especially medicine and chemistry, war and politics, and philosophy, just to name a few.

When I am ready to begin a collage series I begin in one of two ways. Most typically, what I will do is look through whatever I have on hand and intuitively select some materials that look interesting or strike my fancy. Then, I will use this subset of materials to create the first or background layer of the collage. Some collage artists plan everything out in advance, but I tend to “glue as I go”. That is, I make the collage up layer by layer, in a process whereby each new element is added in response to prior work. Sometimes a collage is easy to finish this way with the pre-selected materials, but sometimes as it approaches completion I am not able to find suitable elements in my pile. At that point I either set the work aside, or go back to my vast collection to see what other elements might work.

The other way that I might begin a collage is simply with an idea, or an issue I have on my mind. For example, during the 2016 election I had politics on my mind, so I specifically gathered up materials of a political nature and then used those in lieu of an “intuitively collected” subset. The outcome of this method tends to be more thematically pointed, and could be said to be more explicitly “about” something, rather than strictly an aesthetic practice.

### **Physical Description of the Work**

*Collapsing Distance: A Correspondence* is the latest outworking of my artistic line of inquiry that explores our relationship to place and to life's defining moments. Since its inception, my practice has centered around using collage to explore major life events. One of my earliest cards was made following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. I have kept using this form because it is tangible, portable, sociable and dynamic. These works have existed in an ongoing state of flux where on a given day a piece may oscillate between becoming a piece of plain old snail mail, mail art, faux mail, or most recently, social engagement.

In 2018 I self-produced a solo show *LOVE CHCH: Post-Earthquake Postcards to the City*, which acknowledged the significance of the 2010-2011 Christchurch Earthquakes, not only to me personally, but in the community as well. Prior to the show, I invited people who had lived in Christchurch at the time of the quake but didn't live there currently, to write postcards addressed to the city. These collected postcards were then shown along side my collagework in twenty two wood frames made from wood salvaged from earthquake-damaged buildings. The exhibition was shown in the Christchurch Art Centre, a historic building which itself was recently restored after being damaged in the quakes. During the exhibition I also hosted postcard making workshops that were open to the public, and facilitated discussion about collage aesthetics, but also the impact of the earthquakes.

Upon my return to the United States I was invited to have a solo show *Damaged Goods* at a local café as part of our community's annual "Evanston Made" event. For this exhibit I focused more explicitly on autobiographical narrative, and the sequence and synchronicity of multiple major life events, namely that I found out about the earthquake the same weekend I found out about my now-husband's brain cancer. Whereas the previous show had featured 2 dimensional works on paper, this one began to incorporate 3 dimensional and assemblage elements into shadow boxes, along side the collage.

*Collapsing Distance: A Correspondence* is a natural progression from these projects. Just as *Damaged Goods* expanded on the narrative in *LOVE CHCH: Post-Earthquake Postcards to the City*, so too *Collapsing Distance: A Correspondence* takes the narrative further. *Collapsing Distance* still features the cancer/earthquake moment as the narratives climax, but also examines what takes place before and after that, with a special interest in the succession and simultaneity of events, and significant life locations.

*Collapsing Distance* takes the assemblage work in *Damaged Goods* a step further as well. Rather than an exhibition of frames or shadow boxes, *Collapsing Distance* is an installation of seven mailboxes arrayed linearly, as if they were all houses on the same street. Each mailbox is unique, and represents one place I have lived. Details on and around the box give information about the kind of dwelling place and the local climate, such as a multi-unit mailbox to reference a dormitory, or sand and ice plants around the base in reference to California. Each are placed at various strategic heights to give further clues about dwelling type.

The seven mailboxes of the installation simultaneously reflect eras of time in my life, and the places that I lived in at those times. As noted by Altman, "home is often identified as *the* archetypical landscape, standing alone or joined with the journey, with road, shrine, and garden" (Altman, 41). Mailboxes are not only storage and the jumping off point of a journey for a piece of mail, but they are also symbols of arrival, of returning home. They are micro-dwellings for paper that have a close association with the macro-dwelling for people: there is a one-to-one correspondence between a mailbox and a house. There is one mailbox per dwelling, though there may be more than one mailbox per building depending on the structure and arrangement of the dwellings, as can be found in, say, apartment complexes. The match is so exact that mailboxes often host identifying information for the dwelling, such as a house number or inhabitant's name. These aren't the number or name of the mailbox itself, but rather information about the larger house and its inhabitants.

The row of seven mailboxes will be installed adjacent to the entrance of the gallery, to emphasize ideas of arrival and departure. Surrounding the entire installation is the ubiquitous gallery floor tape – you know, the kind that generally tells you to keep away from the art – but this time inside the tape are the words "come in. come closer. read the mail." This is to encourage viewers to become participant-observers of the piece, to engage with it in an intimate and tactile way.

Inside each box are several envelopes in various styles and colors, all gloriously addressed to "you". Audience members can open one, and feel the rough yet luxurious texture of



layers of old paper. A slight rustling sound comes when the greeting card is pulled from the envelop, and small bits of confetti, sand, or paper, may tumble out. The cards smell of aged paper and spilt coffee, contemplations from years gone by.

Like the cards, each mailbox is unique, expressing characteristics of a certain place and time. The first mailbox is bright pink, wooden, and shaped like a house, with a glass headed clown doll perched precariously on top. The greeting cards in this box contain stories of childhood in Chicago. The second is a slender mail slot, surrounded by ice plants and spilling with sand. The cards and stories in this box are about living in Monterey, California. The third is wider than the ones before it, painted a forest green, with a bright red-and-white striped rose painted on the side. This box captures the time I spent living in New Zealand. These first three boxes are placed at a convenient, reachable height, perfect for opening their doors, as a further invitation for gallery-goers to get their hands on the work.

The fourth mailbox is standard multi-unit box as might be found in a dormitory. One of the doors is tantalizingly ajar, but it's about 7 feet up and well out of the average person's reach. To make the installation equitable for short people (like me) a step stool is installed below this box. This mailslot contains the narrative of my repatriation to the United States for university.

The fifth mailbox, a small wall mounted brass box is so jam-packed with pieces of mail that the lid won't even close. This small, crammed mailbox represents the 18 months that I lived in Minnesota. As measured by the Holmes-Rahe Stress Scale<sup>1</sup>, that season of my life was nearly three times as stressful as any previous stressful period, with several major life events all taking place in a short span of time. The stuffing of the mailbox with mail is emblematic of the way that year was stuffed with major life events. Piece by piece, and letter by letter, narratives of overlapping moments crashing into one another unfold. The mail in this box reveals stories of snow storms, earthquakes, and devastating illness, but also love, tenderness, and romance.

The final section of mailboxes are gathered together above a sisal welcome mat in the shape of a cat. The mail boxes here are vertical metal slots, indicative of a multi-unit dwelling such as an apartment complex or condominium. The box on the left seems to be brass and has two slots, both numbered 410. After the messages in the previous box, the contents here seem neigh on mundane by comparison. The box on the right is more contemporary, and made of aluminium or steel. Several of the doors are easy to open, but a few are locked.

When a viewer chooses to approach any given mailbox, they will find find their options constrained to the contents available in their chosen mailbox. This replicates what we humans experience when we try to recall memories from a certain place while being in another. Memories map on both to time and to space. When people are physically removed from a location certain memories are not as easy to access. People can no longer “reminisce on site” (Van Reken, 80), that is to say, they can no longer easily access memories that emerge organically and spontaneously when one wanders around a familiar location. This effect is replicated in the installation by having the memories divided into separate containers corresponding to various places. Each mailbox only provides access to some of the memories, the ones that most closely correspond with that location.

This array of seven mailboxes comprise the physical installation of *Collapsing Distance*. This project is deeply informed by my upbringing and life experience living in multiple places, including Chicago, California and New Zealand. As an interdisciplinary project, this installation is guided by social science theory and methodologies, and reflective of the global trend towards increased geographic mobility. The project explores significant life events, and what it means when these events are overlapping and overlaid on a globally mobile experience.

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1 The Holmes-Rahe Stress Scale was designed in 1967, and is a rank-ordered list of 43 of life's most stressful events.

## Significant Life Events

Up until the age of 9, the most striking life event that had happened to me was that a few days before my 5<sup>th</sup> birthday I fell off a playhouse and fractured my skull. Fortunately for me, my grandfather was the chief surgeon at the nationally ranked speciality children's hospital that served our area, so I got exceptional care. I bring up this dramatic childhood moment not to glorify it, but rather to illustrate the wonderful banality and mundane contentment that suffused my early childhood in Chicago.

At 9 this pleasant vision started to fracture. We left Chicago. We had a crappy year in another American city. Then when I was 10, life as I knew it completely changed. Our family of five left the United States and moved to New Zealand. To put in perspective what it meant for five Americans to arrive in New Zealand in 1998, know that in 1991 there were only around 8,451 people in New Zealand who had been born in the United States (Swarbrick). That year the Immigration Act of 1987 was put into effect, which shifted away from immigration criteria based on country of origin, and moved towards a skill-based system (NZ Parliament).

We arrived at a time when when a great many Americans, it seems, were arriving too, in fact, the North American population increased by around 50% that decade (Swarbrick). New Zealand was on the heels of a national “brain drain” scare, worried that their best and brightest were leaving for brighter futures elsewhere. But the global economy turns ever on, and skilled migrants, facilitated by the new Immigration Act, arrived just in time to fill the gap. Some of these folks “came because New Zealand recruited foreign teachers to meet local shortages” (Swarbrick). My dad, it would seem, may have been among these: we moved because he had received a teaching job at one of New Zealand's top universities.

Many other remarkable events happened in my life since that time, some of which are explored in this project. But for me, the moment of leaving the United States to live in New Zealand serves as a linchpin around which all other events revolve. If this moment is omitted, much of my narrative no longer hangs together. It is for this reason that this project centers around significant life events, with a special focus on human migration and high mobility.

In the consideration of what makes an event significant or meaningful, this project looks to ethnography of the life cycle, especially the Holmes-Rahe Stress Scale and the work of European ethnographer Arnold van Gennep. Van Gennep's capstone work *Les rites de passage The Rites of Passage* examined life milestones that serve to mark our progression from one section of society to another. “In the work he concentrates on groups and rites individuals might normally encounter progressively: pregnancy, childbirth, initiation, betrothal, marriage, funerals and the like.” Likewise, the Holmes-Rahe Stress Scale identifies life events that happen frequently over the life course that stand out as remarkably stressful. The list is quite similar to Van Gennep's list: pregnancy and birth, beginning or ending romantic relationships, marriage and divorce, gaining and losing work, ill health, and ultimately death. Both of these lists begin to collect up the kinds of common experiences humans have had over and over again throughout the course of time, that for any given person have the potential to be significant and meaningful life event.

In the United States and New Zealand, (and perhaps other places as well), it is customary to give each other greeting cards on the occasion of significant life events. This mapping between significant life events and greeting cards is starkly obvious when the list of stressful life events from a measure such as the Holmes and Rahe stress scale is compared to the list of “Occasions” served by a greeting card company such as Hallmark: birth, death, engagement, marriage, moving to a new home, getting a new job, retirement and so forth. One begins to notice a discrepancy between the two, however, when certain kinds of events are considered. It is easy to find cards for marriage, well wishes, or even death, but not for marital separation, miscarriage, or an increase in arguments, let alone for natural disasters like earthquakes, or geopolitical disasters like 9/11.

These types of difficult events often have components of ambiguous loss, as defined by Pauline Boss. These situations are not simple, and they often lack “closure”. Even in a communally shared event such as 9/11, each of us had unique losses that are hard to articulate. How do you quantify the loss of dignity in citizenship, or the loss of the other citizenship that could have been? Such losses may be “disenfranchised”, meaning that the issue may not be noticed or recognized by the community at large. This means people do not have the opportunity to use communal rituals of grieving, or to have their grief acknowledged or comforted. It's hard to find cards for these kinds of events. The exact losses and stressors that are often stigmatised, hidden or disenfranchised are often ones we have no card for, even if the events are equally stressful as ones we do have cards for.

One artist and greeting card maker who has begun to push against this trend is Emily McDowell of *Emily McDowell and Friends*. Her debut line, which is still her best known, is called *Empathy Cards* which she explains are to help “you find the right words for people experiencing major illness, grief, and loss.” The line focuses on creating encouraging greetings that address people experiencing stressful life events, such as divorce, cancer, chemotherapy, pet loss, invisible chronic illness, infertility, or racial prejudice. Since the release of Emily's *Empathy Cards* in 2013 many other greeting card manufacturers have followed suit, creating cards for hither-to unacknowledged or disenfranchised life events. One imagines that the ritual of sending and receiving a card, and the social acknowledgment of such life event begins to lift the veil of disenfranchised grief, providing solace and comfort in the midst of stressful circumstances.

In her book *There Is No Good Card for This: What To Say and Do When Life Is Scary, Awful, and Unfair to People You Love*, McDowell – together with empathy expert Dr. Kelsey Crowe – discusses ways to navigate other people's stressful life events, and suggest ways to be a supportive friend for those situations “where you don't know what to say [and] there are absolutely no words that will make things better.” Her thesis point is that in the moment of crisis everything is magnified, such that even a modest card can have a tremendous impact, and be remembered for years to come.

*Collapsing Distance* aligns itself with this mentality. It is a material exploration of the significance of a message that arrives at that most critical moment. It is an attempt to imagine what it would be like to have ample time to think over a message of comfort or consolation, when reality is jammed packed full of abrupt pain and jarring stress. What could happen if cards could be sent for all types of stressful occasions, both past and future?

### **Trend Towards Mobility**

One type of event that is especially highlighted in this project is that of geographic mobility. In 1984 Dr. Ted Ward pronounced that people who grew up cross-culturally and in a mobile manner were the prototype citizens of the future (Van Reken, 5). Twenty years later, D Stanley Eitzen observed that “social life has changed dramatically throughout the United States as various social trends isolate us more and more from each other” (641). Primary forces he notes include increased mobility and its attendant impacts on home and work, geographic isolation and trend of living alone, consumerism and its effect of standardizing away local culture, and finally the isolating effects of contemporary communication and transportation technology. It seems Ward's prediction has come to pass.

For example, thirty five percent of Americans have moved in the past 5 years (Warnick, 7), whilst hundreds of thousands of refugees seek asylum in Europe and across the globe (Eurostat, "Asylum quarterly report"). This chronic cycle of movement from one place to another, including having those around you constantly coming or going, is called – to use Ruth Van Reken's term – high mobility (17). Highly mobile people go through the transition stages of moving with greater frequency and regularity than their less mobile counterparts, sometimes experiencing as much change in childhood as some folk experience in a lifetime. Rachel Post explains “perhaps the most foreseeable outcome of the highly mobile upbringing is the chronic cycle of separation and loss... [whereby people]

often suffer losses that are extreme in quantity and timing” (11).

Highly mobile people experience recurring unacknowledged losses, coupled with little time process or grieve (Van Reken, 76). This creates a “continuous meal of loss” (Sara Mansfield Tabor qtd in Van Reken, 63) comprised of ambiguous loss, unresolved grief, hidden loss, disenfranchisement (Gilbert, p.94), and complicated, prolonged, or delayed grieving. Those who are highly mobile can lose possessions, people, places, positions, links to previous life phases, the past, pets, traditions, lifestyle, and ultimately lose their sense that the world is a safe and trustworthy place (Gilbert & Gilbert, 252). Some ramifications of these issues include depression, anxiety, stress, and diminished quality of life and wellbeing (Davis, 129).

As the United States in specific, and the globe more broadly, shifts away from a stationary mono-cultural environment to a more mobile, globalized one, more and more people are being impacted by the negative side of high mobility. They experience the attendant ambiguous loss, unresolved grief and disenfranchisement that comes with it. They struggle with questions of identity, personal dignity and prestige, links to previous life phases, the past, and traditions. If in a mere 20 years, Ward's prediction came to pass, what will happen in the next 20? What problems will those future people face? What sorts of tools will be available to them?

### **Materiality as Resilience**

In their groundbreaking work *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds* David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken provide anecdotal evidence that objects can play a beneficial role in the lives of people who are highly mobile (184-186), and they even advise collecting such “sacred objects” as a practice (223). *Collapsing Distance* is an experimental extension of these ideas. It explores how object-making, and object keeping can become a practice of meaning-making and resilience-building. Van Reken and Pollock were silent as to the mechanisms by which “sacred objects” improve wellbeing. This paper endeavors to outline some theoretical reasons why this practice is beneficial.

Certain wellbeing impacts of high mobility have been studied through the lenses of mental health (see Gilbert 2008, Davis 2013 or Post 2016), but apart from my own scholarly work on the topic (see Hill, 2018 ), little has been done to join these discussions on wellbeing with the literature on object and material culture. This section will summarize the relevant scholarly literature and examine the work of artists are exploring these questions, such as Rhonda Wheatley, Alison Aune, Allison Gilbert, and Teng Onn Tan.

Although little research has been done on the role of objects for the highly mobile, some has been conducted exploring the role of objects during life transitions such as moving to university (Silver 1996 or Habermas & Paha 1992) or moving into a retirement or nursing facility (Wapner 1990, Tobin 1996, Kroger & Adair 2008 etc). This body of research provides the theoretical reasons why cherished objects might be useful for people experiencing the transitions brought about by high mobility. Building off the definition provided by Kroger and Adair, “for purposes of this study, *cherished, treasured, and valued objects or possession* will refer to those physical objects that hold a special meaning for the individual [and] provides the owner with a sense of pleasure, comfort, attachment, or well-being” (6, emphasis original) and objects whose loss would be devastating.

In what ways can cherished, treasured, and valued objects provide pleasure, comfort, and wellbeing, when people are suffering losses of relationships, of system identity and status, physical places, connections to the past and past self, and a sense that the world safe and trustworthy place? Broadly, the answer to this question rests on two main ideas: materiality and synecdoche. As material things, objects engage all the senses and activate our memory, and as representative objects they can stand in for the object of our longing. Together these two ideas, materiality and synecdoche, can be used to create a sense of co-presence. Loretta Baldassar describes it this way:

All of the senses are affected by this longing for and missing as people yearn to see, hear and

touch (embrace) their loved ones, just as they crave the special foods and smells and tastes associated with these people and places. Hence, the way to manage the heartache of longing for and missing is through sensual contact and co-presence, in other words, through feeling the presence of people and places involving all of the five senses.  
(252)

Objects are tangible, and experienced with all senses. Just as walking through a space can jog our memory, handling a familiar object activates free-recall, and brings to mind thoughts and memories that might not be available during more intentional attempts (Reales, 653). Objects are a concrete expression of one's personalities (Gosling) and a record of one's life story. In their work with older adults, Kroger and Adair found that “because older adults are likely to have experienced many changes in their lives, they keep valued possessions that do not change as a representation of personal history” (2008), and this can be just as applicable for young people who have experienced a lot of change through high mobility. Kroger and Adair explain that “personal possessions [serve as] tools that provided a link with the past and enabled the owner to engage in a life review process and to reminisce about the past” (2008). This is similar to findings from Price, Arnould, and Curasi (2000) who found that cherished possessions play a key role in reminiscence and the life review process. As a tool of resilience, the life review process is a way to use the past to make sense of the present.

Highly mobile people experience a two fold loss of the past. The first is a loss of the past as it was (meaning their old way of living life which has been left), but also they experience a loss of the past as it could have been. An unnamed person quoted in Gilbert and Gilbert explains it this way “My husband grew up in a small town...and lived in the same house all his growing up years, and sometimes I just long for that” (2011, p.255). Therefore the collection and maintenance of meaningful objects is useful to highly mobile people as it creates a concrete record of the past. Also, these objects provide a way to conduct the life review process, which itself is a tool for resilience.

In addition to this scholarly research, artists – especially those in the African Diaspora – have been exploring these questions too. One such artist is Rhonda Wheatley. She is interdisciplinary, working in performance, teaching, writing, collage, installation, assemblage and sculpture. Her *Hybrid Devices* sculpture series demonstrate the importance of sensory experience and the role material objects in activating memory. For example, engagement with her piece *Guidance Counselor* “restores a portion of users’ memories of their eternal selves” (Wheatley, 2017).

Her work demonstrates a clear understanding of the role material objects in activating memory and prompting life-review. Her piece *Prismatic, Poly-Incarnation & Parallel Universe Relationship Observation Device* highlights the importance of sensory detail for manifesting resilience. She states “Engaging with this device is akin to being immersed in an ultra-real, multi-dimensional, surround-sensory-like re-play of interpersonal moments from one’s current life and past lifetimes...” (Wheatley) Likewise, her 2017 piece *Life Review Device* is designed to trigger “a life re-boot. Users re-experience their entire lives in a full/extra-sensory consciousness download, infused with the hope and purpose with which they entered this lifetime” (Wheatley).

Rhonda's work also demonstrates an understanding of ambiguous loss, and a recognition of how objects can address this loss. Two works that show this are *Trauma Healer* and *African diasporic Ancestral Memory Transmutation Device*. Both of these pieces are designed to address the aftereffects of traumatic experiences. The first “Repairs damage to physical body brought on by emotional trauma, beginning at the cellular level,” while the second “extinguishes/ quells effects of trauma passed down genetically from ancestors” (Wheatley).

As synecdoche, objects are also useful because they can stand in for the object of our longing.

As mentioned by Baldassar, two key longings mobile people face are longings for people, and longing for places. Objects can be used to stand in for both of these. Extensive research shows that one of the key features of treasured objects is that they can serve as a reminder of relationships (see Cram and Paton 1993, Habermas 1996, Kroger & Adair, 2008). In fact, “significant others can be brought into a psychological presence via the symbolic meaning of a treasured possession” (Habermas 1996, in Kroger). In their 1981 multigenerational research, Csikszentmihalyi and Halton found that not only did photos regularly serve the purpose of bringing others to mind, but so did artwork and other forms of culture, especially when received as a gift. Fifteen years later Ira Silver's work with first year University students confirmed that one main purpose of our objects is to represent express our relationships with significant others (in this case, parents) (Silver, 1996). So whether someone is absent from others because they moved into a new care facility, or moved to university, or because of high mobility, objects can serve as reminders of important relationships.

An artist who's practice embodies this theory well is Alison Aune. She is an interdisciplinary practitioner who engages in painting, mixed media, and collage to explore cultural heritage, ethnic identity, and ancestry. As part of her practice as an art educator she hosted a mixed media workshop at the Swedish American Museum in January of 2019. The workshop was a practical way to bring loved ones “into a psychological presence via the symbolic meaning of a treasured possession” as Habermas says. Aune invited attendees “to bring paper copies of old photos of ancestors, homesteads, textiles and artifacts” (Swedish American Museum) which would then be incorporated into mixed media works.

Unlike Alison Aune, Allison Gilbert is a journalist by trade. However her practice as raveled in her recent book *Passed and Present: Keeping Memories of Loved Ones Alive* demonstrates the same profundity of understanding as Aune's work. The book is a collection of 85 “creative and meaningful ways to keep the memory of loved ones alive” (Gilbert, Allison). The book's primary focus is addressing the loss of a loved one that happens through death, and the text itself does not apply these ideas to cases of ambiguous loss. Some projects engage the visual sense include working with photos (45) or creating a scrapbook (7), while others engage gastronomic or olfactory senses such as preserving recipes and preparing a favorite meal (82). For those suffering the ambiguous losses of high mobility, the practices in this book can provide a pathway to creating co-presence with loved ones whose are still alive, but geographically absent.

In addition to losing people, one of the most clear - though not necessarily most acknowledged - losses of high mobility is the loss of places (Gilbert 2008). It is part of human nature to attach to our environment (Altman, 1992), to form emotional bonds to places, and incorporate places into our sense of identity (Hull, 1994). Highly mobile people might be raised in one country, and upon repatriation to another, their attachment to the other might be overlooked or socially minimised, since now they are in their “home country,” making for disenfranchised grief. Move over, the highly mobile person can no longer reminisce “on site” (Van Reken 80), so part of their personal history is left behind as well.

Just as it is human to attach to places and feel grief when we leave, it is human to use objects to represent places, as the entire souvenir industry has so beautifully demonstrated (Cram and Paton's findings also support the notion that objects serve as reminders of places). One can express temporal self integration through a collection of personal objects representing significant places from one's life story. This sentiment is expressed in textile and interior decorating books like *Cloth* by Cassandra Ellis, and *Gypsy* by Sibella Court, who suggest layer textile and object elements from different times and place of life give expression to the rich layers of one's life story. Next, one can look at the work of Teng Onn Tan. Tan is an artist who who creates pieces about New Zealand. Of special interest is his "Piece of Christchurch" series, which incorporated post-earthquake rubble and beautiful architecture sketches, to create a limited number of one-of-a-kind hangings and shadowboxes. The series is sold out, and the works are "now all in the hands of people who was once love and live in the city [*sic*]" (Onn).

Just like the work of Teng Onn Tan, Allison Gilbert, Alison Aune, and Rhonda Wheatley, *Collapsing Distance* is an installation that seeks to apply these theoretical concepts via visual and material means. The project recognizes that material objects are tools of resilience for every day people, and most especially for the highly mobile. *Collapsing Distance* uses materiality as synchdoche for people, places, previous life phases, the past – the very things often lost due to high mobility. This project draws on the knowledge that being in specific places and touching physical objects gives access to memory, and that memory is a tool of meaning making.

### **Time**

Here in the United States time is perceived as primarily linear and, when mapped on to the body, organized along the sagittal axis. From the subject's perspective future is spoken of as “ahead” or “in front”, while the past is “behind” or “in back” (Lakoff, 41). The English language's way of communicating about time typically imagines time as a moving object and positions the subject as if the subject and time were two people facing each other. And so it is that our language maps time on to space, and that space is used as an analog for time – they are both something we speak about “travelling” through and we most naturally travel frontwards, facing forward.

So English speakers come to think of time spatially, as if were a road or a river flowing as far as the eye can see in either direction both before and behind, with possible futures “branching out” ahead according to the laws of probability (McCall, pg 341). This philosophy can be clearly seen in Randall Monroe's comic stripe “931: Lanes.” Our tales of time travel, even as they may involve jumping between various branches of possible futures, typically respect a linear, sagittal organization of time.

In his unfinished novel *The Dark Tower*, C.S. Lewis proposes another axis of time, one which “will cut an ideally normal time at right angles” (Lewis, 84). Just as we move forward and backward along the sagittal axis of time, Lewis proposes that one can move “andwards and eckwards” along this other dimension. This way of thinking about time allows us to imagine that the time-river has a bank to be explored, or that the time-road has a curb or a sidewalk, some place we could get off the path to think about and watch the flow of time go by. Lewis states “Not all the times that are outside the present are therefore past or future.... It was in a different place...where those things remain that are taken off time's main-road, behind the invisible hedges, into the unimaginable fields.” (203).

Evidence of this view of time is seen when when English speakers discuss time with their hands and bodies, rather than with language. Daniel Cassanto notes that they “use the lateral axis (left/right) overwhelmingly more often, gesturing leftward for earlier times and rightward for later times.” At that point, since our left and our right sides are symmetrical the direction time seems to flow is not determined by our bodies, as with frontward motion. Rather, the direction of flow is constrained by the culture around us, most notably by the way our orthography is arranged. Cassanto notes that “Because graphic conventions in English-speaking cultures have an implicit rightward directionality, English speakers have a polarized left-right spatial continuum which can be co-opted for time.” In otherwords, when we imagine watching time, we watch it flow like writing, left to right.

Like Lewis, Cassanto proposes that this way of thinking might be “evidence for a mental timeline viewed from the deictic perspective of an imaginary experiencer rotated 90 degrees rightward from the speaker” (662). In otherwords, when our bodies consider time – rather than our words – we have available to us the opportunity to perceive ourselves as objective observers, outside of of time's flow, watching it move without us being in it. This way, rather than being caught in the traffic jam of time, we find ourselves on the sidewalk, able to stop and smell the roses, watching both vehicles and houses go by on either side.

As a physical installation, *Collapsing Distance* recognizes the way our culture analogizes time with space. It makes reference to mailboxes as would be found on an actual street, and reminds viewers that we think this way of time, also. It acknowledges the cultural convention of placing items linearly

with the most distal in time on the left, and the most recent on the right. This installation allows the viewer to engage in the familiar linear flow of time common in our culture, and simultaneously encourages them to consider what additional details can be seen when chronological events are viewed from the objective observer perspective, rather than the subjective position of being caught in time. What does it mean to wander around in time, as seem to we are able to do in space? Viewers can test out how to answer this by approaching the installation from a complete 180° degrees.

### **Collected Conclusions**

*Collapsing Distance* is an interdisciplinary project that explores significant life events, meaningful places, and the synchronicities and connects between these. It is a nonlinear autobiographical narrative of the first 30 years of my life, and experienced materially and tangibly through an installation of seven mail boxes. Observers are invited to participate by opening the mailboxes and examining the collages and items inside the boxes. The project examines the impact of increased mobility and globalization, and proposes material objects as as a tool for resilience.

This work stands in relation to the work of contemporary greeting card designer Emily McDowell, and the published idea book *Passed and Present*, by Allison Gilbert. As an assemblage installation and material investigation of memory activation, this project rubs shoulders with the works of Rhonda Wheatley and Alison Aune. Like all these works, it recognizes cherished objects as meaningful and powerful tools for meaning-making and resilience.

In the future I hope to expand my practice to include teaching and workshops, just as Alison Aune and Rhonda Wheatley do. I also hope to write a book teaching people how to make meaningful objects, along with the research that supports those practices. Perhaps I would also be able to combine the two, and develop a workshop series or curriculum for highly mobile people, that provides creative was to address each of the losses attendant to high mobility (possessions, people, places, positions, links to previous life phases, the past, pets, traditions, lifestyle, and the sense that the world is a safe and trustworthy place). I am excited to see where these projects take me in the future.



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- Wheatley, Rhonda. *Prismatic, Poly-Incarnation & Parallel Universe Relationship Observation Device*. 2017, Chicago, Illinois. Two vintage clock radios, found bird sculpture, and three natural orange rhomboid calcite crystals.

## **Project Documentation**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting safety measures, the gallery installation and subsequent documentation of this project has not taken place as originally intended.

## Process Documentation



*Digital sketch of installation layout*  
November, 2019  
Artist's Rendition



- Arriving (that is, being born a human at a given time)
- Starting School
- Holidays and Ancestors (Pulaski Day)
- Gun Violence
- Great Chicago Fire
- Resilience and Disaster
- Parents' occupations
- New Orleans Clown Doll
- Shoe Shopping
- Trigger Thumbs
- Falling off the Playhouse
- Resilience and Disaster

*"Chicago Childhood" mailbox*

*collage of found photographs with notes on relevant themes and significant life events*

November, 2019

Artist's Rendition



- Santa Monica
- Fathers and Fatherhood
- Men and the Military
- The Atomic Bomb and stuff
- 

- Arriving
- Starting another type of School
- Stereotypes of beach life
- Fourth of July in the Fog
- Dolls washing out to sea
- Our Dunes
- What's California anyway?

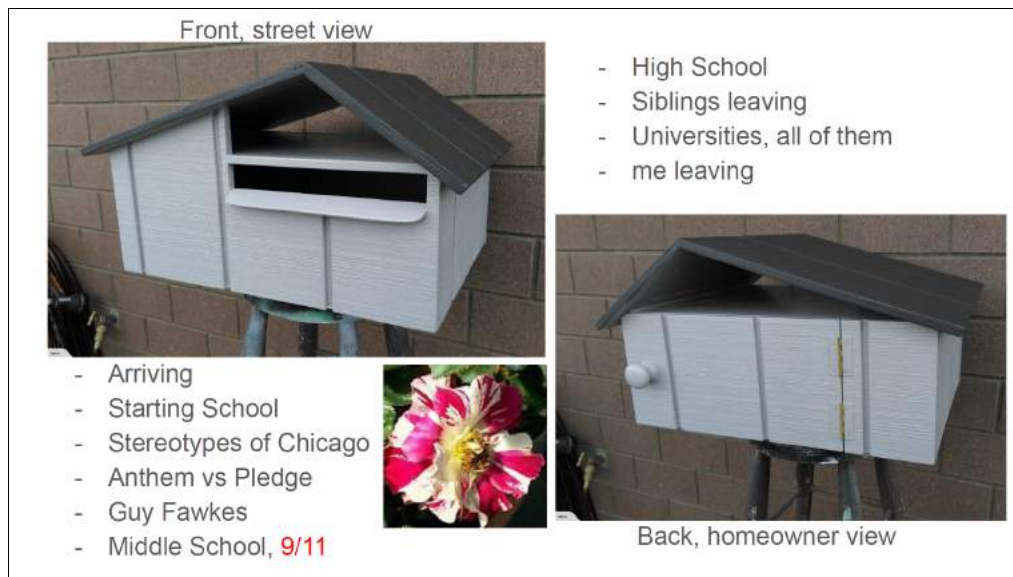


*"Monterey" Mailbox*

*collage of found photographs with notes on relevant themes and significant life events*

November, 2019

Artist's Rendition



*Canterbury Letterbox*

*collage of found photographs with notes on relevant themes and significant life events*

November, 2019

Artist's Rendition



*College Dorm*

*collage of found photographs with notes on relevant themes and significant life events*

November, 2019

Artist's Rendition



*Minnesota Mailbox*  
*collage of found photographs with notes on relevant themes and significant life events*  
November, 2019  
Artist's Rendition



*Married Mailboxes*  
*collage of found photographs with notes on relevant themes and significant life events*  
November, 2019  
Artist's Rendition


### Gathering Mailboxes

CL [chicago](#) > [northwest indiana](#) > [for sale](#) > [general for sale - by owner](#)

[prev](#) [next](#)

[reply](#) [favorite](#) [hide](#) [flag](#) Posted 27 days ago

#### 4 box mailbox for apartments - \$75 (New Lenox)



Used 4 box mailbox for apartment building or multi unit \$75.00 Original \$225.00


- do NOT contact me with unsolicited services or offers

*“Shopping on Craigslist”*  
Sample Screenshot  
2020  
Courtesy of the Artist

Etsy Search for items or shops

Jewelry & Accessories Clothing & Shoes Home & Living Wedding & Party Toys & Entertainment Art & Collectibles Craft Supplies Vintage Gifts

You bought this item on March 3, 2020. [View Receipt](#)



thejunkman 8,559 sales  
★★★★★  
**Vintage Brass Mail Box**  
[Ask a question](#)

Vintage from before 2000

Description  
Maybe you could use a mailbox like this one. It is made of brass and has keyhole hangers on its back that you can use to hang it on the porch there at your house. It has a hasp latch, that you can get a lock for, that will offer some protection from "porch thieves."

[Learn more about this item](#)

*“Shopping Online Really Well”*  
Sample Screenshot  
2020  
Courtesy of the Artist

*“I Got it on Ebay”*  
Sample Screenshot  
2020  
Courtesy of the Artist


https://www.ebay.com/itm/Lot-Of-5-Vintage-Post-Office-Bo... 120%

Search for anything All Ca

Back to previous page | Listed in category: Collectibles > Banks, Registers & Vending > Still, Piggy Banks > Other Collecti

You won this auction. | [View order details](#)

#### Lot Of 5 Vintage Post Office Box Doors Crafts Make Banks [See original listing](#)



Condition: **Used**  
Ended: Mar 06, 2020, 4:18PM  
Winning bid: **US \$20.00** [ 1 bid ]  
Shipping: **\$10.90** Expedited Shipping  
Item location: Hope, Kansas, United States  
Seller: [ridgwayoutdoors\\*](#) (664 ★) | [Seller's other items](#)

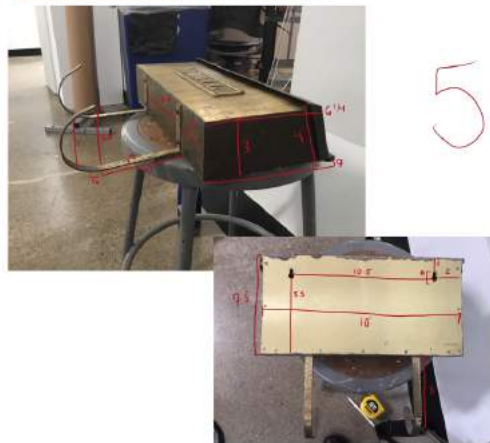
[Sell one like this](#)

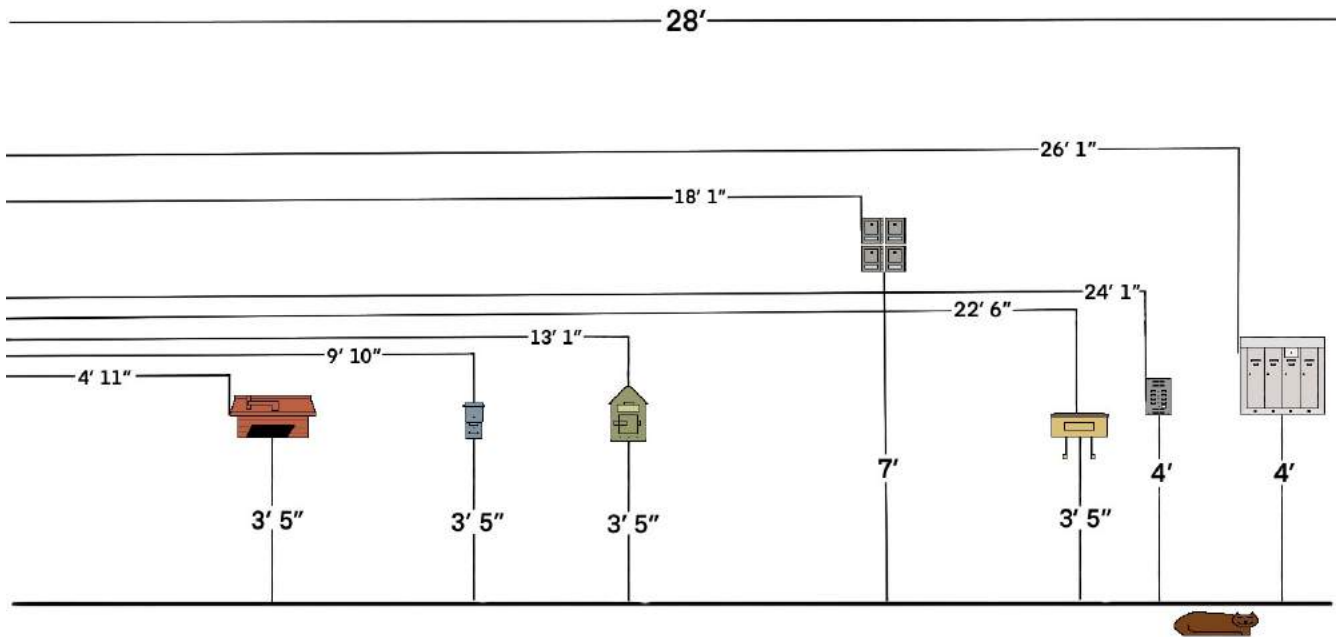


### Measuring the Mailboxes and Making Installation Diagrams with Ali Schiffner



*Ali's Digital Measurement Notes*  
2020  
Courtesy of Ali Schiffner





*Installation mockup of Collapsing Distance: A Correspondence*  
2020  
Illustrated by Ali Schiffner

**Preparing Grant Application and Marketing Materials with Photographer Jonathan Castillo**



*Patriotism, like a View from a Long Way Away 2001-2021,*  
2020

vintage USPS-certified Mailbox, vintage handmade greeting card, blue construction paper, cocktail flags, child's handwriting

Photography by Jonathan Castillo

*Collapsing Distance Thesis*

*Examples 1 and 2*

2019

Photography by Jonathan Castillo

