

I'm a Ghost of You/You're a Ghost of Me
a photographic exploration of memory and place attachment

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There is an intrinsic, deep-rooted connection between memory and place. Throughout life people often ask others where they were when important events occurred, using place as a landmark for retrieving the memory. This attachment to place and its significance in our society in relation to memory is both captivating and complex. Through a photographic survey of suburban landscapes from my past, *I'm a Ghost of You/You're a Ghost of Me* explores my relationship and attachment to locations of personal significance.

Of the seven suburban landscapes displayed, four of them are public, recreational spaces, while three are residential. These locations include an elementary school, a public park, a public pool, my college campus, and various homes I lived in throughout my twenties. All of these locations are home to important memories which played a powerful part in shaping who I am today. These locations provided comfort, safety, and support at various points in my life. However, as I grew, and time progressed, the spaces and my relationship with them changed. These changes were all extremely difficult for me to deal with, as I was reluctant to move on and let go of my connection to the homes, parks, and, and schools. The residential images are all taken at a closer range than the public spaces, with the homes filling around one third of the frame. The public spaces are all taken at a further vantage point, the foreground and the sky creating a larger sense of overall drama in comparison to the residential spaces. This push and pull between spaces that are closer and further, more dramatic and less dramatic, leads the viewer on a journey.

While choosing the locations for *I'm a Ghost of You/You're a Ghost of Me* it was important that they remain neutral and mundane, as so often for me those are the

memories that are strongest. Additionally, each location had to be relatable to the viewer while also remaining non-commercial. This meant staying away from well-known locations and easily identifiable buildings. This was accomplished in the public spaces by photographing around signage and sides of buildings that displayed business names and other identifiable text. To help the viewer connect to the space each image is given a title that contains part of the story from the place. These titles are sometimes humorous, such as “the mice were too smart for the traps” and other times a bit more banal, such as “sunny days without sunscreen.” The titles operate in such a manner that they intrigue the viewer and prompt them to further question what happened in these spaces and why my connection to them is so important.

The quality of light in the photographs is extremely important, as well as a common thread between each image in the series. Each image was photographed just before or after sunrise or sunset, otherwise known as golden hour, depending on which direction the subject faced. This time of light allowed for a few different magical things to happen. The subjects themselves have an almost ethereal glow, light soft enough to illuminate the scene without washing out the details of the houses and parks and their surroundings. Subtle hues of pinks and oranges can be found in the highlights, while shadows take on a cyan tint. At the same time these photographs are being captured, artificial light sources are typically on and a similar brightness to the sky in terms of the zone system. In other words the sky and the artificial light sources need the same exposure time without blowing out highlights or losing detail. This allows those artificial light sources to subtly come into play, adding new color temperatures and illuminating parts of the scene otherwise in shadow, without being excessively bright in comparison

to the rest of the scene. At the same time, these light sources are not blown out or overly distracting to the rest of the scene.

This body of work is comprised of seven panoramic suburban landscapes cropped to an aspect ratio of 65:24. This particular aspect ratio allows the viewer to see more of the scene while maintaining a sense of intimacy and closeness, even in scenes where the subject is further from the viewer. It also allows the viewer to see more of the surroundings than an image with a 16:9 ratio, the standard crop for widescreen television, without including excess information. This also allows them to easily enter and interact with the space, there are more areas to search and explore. The panoramic images, combined with the quality of light in each image, have a cinematic nature, which helps them work almost as film stills, a small moment in a larger plot. This further pushes the viewer to question what happened in the scene. Each image is comprised of three to six images digitally stitched together in photoshop. This process creates a new view of each location photographed due to slight distortions created during the stitching process itself. While the tripod remained stationary the camera rotated to the rightmost image, starting at the furthest left image. Even when using a nodal point tripod head, which allowed me to rotate around the center of the camera, distortion is inevitable.

There are two types of memory, semantic and episodic. Semantic memory includes what would be considered common knowledge based of the facts gathered from childhood to now. Examples of semantic memory include knowing how to use basic tools and objects such as the phone or a pair of scissors, remembering capitals to

different states and countries, or being able to recite the alphabet.¹ Most importantly, semantic memories are based off of absolute facts and are not associated with emotional reactions and personal experiences.² On the opposite side of the spectrum is episodic memory, those driven entirely by personal experiences and emotional responses.³

I'm a Ghost of You/You're a Ghost of Me explores episodic memory. Episodic memory makes it possible for individuals to be aware of previous experiences in their lives. This ability also allows individual to time travel, mentally, into their own personal past.⁴ Episodic memories are organized as a specific sequence of events taking place at specific times in specific locations. Thus, an extremely detailed episodic memory contains information regarding the events leading up to the specific memory being recalled, as well as the events following the specific memory.⁵ When someone recalls an episodic memory they act as an observer to their own experience. In addition to remembering the event they often remember the specific emotions associated with such, often reliving those emotions to some extent during recall.⁶

Memory, specifically episodic memory, is also extremely malleable.⁷ Episodic memories are encoded and stored in the hippocampus, then retrieved, a process that

¹ Tulving, Endel. "What Is Episodic Memory?" *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 2, no. 3 (1993). 67

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. 68

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Eichenbaum, Howard, and Norbert Fortin. "Episodic Memory and the Hippocampus: It's about Time." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12, no. 2 (2003). 55

⁶ Mayes, Andrew R., and Neil Roberts. "Theories of Episodic Memory." *Episodic Memory: New Directions in Research*, 2002. 1395.

⁷ Giroux, Megan E., Lara Boyd, Deborah A. Connolly, and Daniel M. Bernstein. "Reconstructing The Past." *Memory*, 2018. 148.

can manipulate the memory over time.⁸ This recall process is typically intentional; however, they can also be triggered by similar experiences or surroundings.⁹ Each time the memory is recalled it transforms slightly, and the next time it is recalled the most recent transformation is what is remembered. The more detail that makes it into the initial representation of the memory the more accurate the recalled memory will be, however this does not mean that more detailed memories are not subject to the same transformation process as others.¹⁰ Since these changes are taking place slowly over time, they often go unnoticed.¹¹

Our personal memory system, such as episodic memory, is inherently linked to sense of place and place attachment, as is emotional response.¹² ¹³ Emotion is a fundamental part of the relationship between environment and person, and is critical to the overall concept of place attachment.¹⁴ Sense of place can be defined as the emotional association individuals have with specific locations.¹⁵ However, place attachment takes this concept a bit further, and is defined as “an affective bond or link between people and a specific place”.¹⁶ While sense of place and place attachment are extremely similar, place attachment can be further conceptualized through both place identity and place dependence. Place identity is the emotional connectedness

⁸ Paul Morgan, "Towards a Developmental Theory of Place Attachment". 1396.

⁹ Ibid, 1399.

¹⁰ Ibid, 1397.

¹¹ Megan E. Giroux et al., "Reconstructing The Past," Memory, 2018. 151.

¹² Jorgenson, Jake D. and Nickerson, Norma P. Ph.D., "Attachment to tourism destinations: The role of memory and place attachment" (2016). Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally. 2-8.

¹³ Paul Morgan, "Towards a Developmental Theory of Place Attachment". 1400.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Jorgenson, Jake D. and Nickerson, Norma P. Ph.D., "Attachment to tourism destinations: The role of memory and place attachment" (2016), 2.

¹⁶ Ibid.

individuals feel regarding specific locations, while place dependence focuses on if that emotional experience can be had at a similar location.¹⁷ More simply put, place attachment takes into consideration the emotional connection an individual associates with specific locations as well as how repeatable those experiences are elsewhere. The less repeatable the experience the stronger the attachment to the place. For example, one may have fond memories of swimming at a local pool as a child, an experience that is fairly easy to recreate, resulting in a weak place attachment. However if their memories involve specific aspects of that pool that cannot be found elsewhere, such as the slide, snack bar, and playground, the attachment to place would be significantly stronger. These strong attachments to place, combined with emotionally charged memories, result in people yearning for their past.

Feeling Photography, a book of essays discussing the effects photography can have on our lives, explores the complex relationship between photography and our emotional responses to imagery. In the mid nineteenth century when photography was invented¹⁸, it was regarded more as a mechanical document than a piece of artwork that could illicit emotional responses.¹⁹ However, views on the photograph started to shift by the late nineteenth and early twentieth, and it began to be viewed more as an art form.²⁰ The photograph was believed to be a record of what was present at the time the image was made, making it impossible to lie about the subject at hand.²¹ Seeing this truth laid out in an image produces an emotional response, which in turn required

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Brown, Elspeth H., and Thy Phu. *Feeling Photography*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. 4.

¹⁹ Ibid, 9.

²⁰ Ibid, 4.

²¹ Ibid, 15.

reflection from the viewer.²² This period of personal reflection opens the photograph to deeply personal significance, a topic further discussed in Roland Barthe's book *Camera Lucida*.²³

Barthes also touches upon the idea of time, arguing against the traditional notion that time heals all wounds. He refuses to believe this, stating instead that time merely eliminates the emotion of loss.²⁴ Towards the end of the book Barthes discusses the photograph in terms of reality, claiming that a photograph is loaded evidence. He states, "Here is where the madness is, for until this day no representation could assure me of the past of a thing except by intermediaries; but with the Photograph, my certainty is immediate: no one in the world can undecieve me."²⁵ Barthes implies that regardless of the content of the image, it provides proof of a reality that must at one point have existed. At the same time this photograph is constantly preserving the past, allowing the past to exist in the present when the image is viewed.²⁶ *I'm a Ghost of You/You're a Ghost of Me* focuses on this ability to preserve the past in a photograph and provide proof that the memory comes from a place of truth. This truth could be a factual truth or our own truth that we've created over time from recalling and changing the memory.

This physical proof of memory is important due to both the unreliability of memory and the constant desire to surround ourselves with mementos from the past. We are constantly trying to make our current environment comfortable by surrounding

²² Ibid, 29.

²³ Ibid, 34.

²⁴ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Noonday Press, 1988. 75.

²⁵ Ibid, 115.

²⁶ Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu, *Feeling Photography*. 37.

ourselves with as much proof of the past as possible.²⁷ Family photo albums, keepsakes, vacation pictures, souvenirs, and miscellaneous antiques fill our homes as constant reminders of what the past held. By retaining these pieces of our past we validate ourselves and our personal memories while also obtaining physical proof of past events.²⁸ Ironically, the items we keep do not have to be completely accurate representations of our past, they only need to convince us that any given event really did happen.²⁹ This constant aching for our past and proof of its existence is a natural consequence of replacement. We must first replace something to appreciate how much we valued the original.³⁰ You might hate your current apartment and only focus on the negative things like a leaky faucet, ripped window screens, improper heating and cooling, or noisy neighbors. However, when you move to a new apartment you will look back on your old one with fondness. Maybe the kitchen had more storage, the bedroom was just a bit bigger, or the windows let in plenty of natural light. These things typically go unappreciated until we realize what we are missing, for we will typically look back on the past with fondness rather than dissatisfaction.³¹

It is this feeling of longing and affection that the series captures. While each of the locations photographed have positive and negative memories associated with them, these photographs focus on the optimistic side of things. The lighting in the images presents the scenes in a positive and inviting manner. Tempting pathways featured in the majority of the images entice the viewer into the scene. The sense of humor found

²⁷ Lowenthal, David. "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory." *Geographical Review* 65, no. 1 (1975). 6.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 9.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 12.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

³¹ Jorgenson, Jake D. and Nickerson, Norma P. Ph.D., "Attachment to tourism destinations: The role of memory and place attachment" (2016)., 8-9.

in some of the titles continues the impression of positivity. This body of work also represents the fact that we must replace our past in order to appreciate it. The three houses featured all hold importance that was not realized until they were no longer accessible or aspects of them changed. At one point in time the college campus was viewed as only a place of dread and anger but is now remembered with fondness and enjoyment. Furthermore, these photographs fulfill the intrinsic need to prove that these places were real. By preserving them permanently in a photograph it is lasting proof that they existed. Much like a souvenir on the mantle to remind you of a trip to the beach, these photographs function as that reminder.

More than intensive research played a part in the creation of this body of work. Fellow photographers were frequently viewed and researched as well, specifically for their use of light, composition, titles, and subject matter. The works of Nate Larson and Marni Shindelman, Joel Sternfeld, and Angela Strassheim have all been extremely influential throughout the making of *I'm a Ghost of You/You're a Ghost of Me*.

Geolocation, a body of work by Nate Larson and Marni Shindelman, a collaborative photography duo, focuses on combining miscellaneous tweets with images taken from the same geolocation tagged with said tweet. This act of visiting the physical location of something that previously only existed in a virtual world allows the artist to anchor and memorialize online data in a physical location as well as beg viewers to question expectations of privacy (Larson-Schindelman). One thing all the images have in common is the quality of light. Every surface in the images appears to be glowing with light, even where it may not seem entirely possible. With the exception of a few vehicles and one image featuring the reflection of the photographer, there is no human

presence. The combination of the text with the imagery encourages the viewer to create a narrative where none is given to them. In a similar manner, this series also focuses on the quality of light in the scene. Utilizing pre and post sunset lighting helps to ensure the almost ethereal glow present in the images. The text paired with the images of *Geolocation* functions in a very similar way to the titles in *I'm a Ghost of You/You're a Ghost of Me*. They inform the viewers that something deeper happened in this space and encourage the viewer to draw connections between the text and the image. Additionally, both bodies of work lack a human presence. This reinforces the idea that the work is about the space itself, not who is in the space.

Joel Sternfeld's body of work *On This Site* focuses on locations in which horrific crimes occurred that are also of importance to understanding American history. These images, all void of direct human presence, present each location as it is, unedited and without frills. This presentation manner makes the location appear void of any sense of potential tragedy. The images themselves are pleasant to look at, featuring formal compositions that welcome the viewer in, even when the scenery may be exceedingly mundane, like an average parking lot. Sternfeld also uses the natural lighting to help create an overall mood in his imagery. My body of work takes cues from Sternfeld's use of light and his compositions. Likewise, these photographs took inspiration from Sternfeld's photographs of mundane places with deep importance. Sternfeld's images focus primarily on everyday places such as streets, houses, hotels, and workspaces. These individual images have no meaning to the viewer until they are paired with the text, much like *I'm a Ghost of You/You're a Ghost of Me*.

Angela Strassheim's *Evidence* series has also been extremely influential to the creation of this body of work. Strassheim photographs scenes of violent crimes in mostly banal ways. Frontal views of homes and other structures make up the majority of the series. Black and white interiors shot after covering the crime scene in luminol, a substance used to detect blood and bodily fluids, make up the rest. The harsh contrast between the commonplace exteriors and the harsh interiors, splattered with suggestions of violence, pushes and pulls the viewer throughout the series. Each image is paired with the title of "Evidence" followed by either a number, for the black and white interior shots, or the list of evidence found on the scene in parentheses for the exterior shots. The titles paired with the images encourage viewers to question more about what they are seeing. Why was there a pitchfork in this calm looking suburban home? What interior matches the exterior? What really happened here? In both *Evidence* and my series the titles are clues to the larger story. They prompt the viewer to reexamine the images, searching for visual confirmation of what they're being told happened here. Additionally, neither title tells the viewer the full story of the space.

I want the viewer to get a sense of nostalgia and mystery when looking at my work. Viewers should consider what happened in the locations shown based off of the title, while also considering why the specific place shown would be considered one of importance to me. I encourage the viewer to think more about their own memories and attachment to places in their own lives, ideally drawing similarities between mine and their own. Finally, viewers may be compelled to reflect upon the relationship between memory and place, and what effect that has had upon their own lives.

Studies show that there is a fundamental and complex connection between memory and place attachment. We keep these places close to us through the use of keepsakes and photographs. *I'm a Ghost of You/You're a Ghost of Me* explores my relationship and attachment to locations of personal significance through a re-photographic survey of suburban landscapes. This process allows me to connect to the space and create my own physical representation of a previous time that cannot be returned to.

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The mice were too smart for the traps



Alcohol wall, cops, and a porch couch



Secrets in a turquoise jeep



“Has anyone ever tried to jump?”



Sunny days without sunscreen



I took you on tours of the playground



I would trust the wiring, don't worry