The ghosts of place

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We moderns, despite our mechanistic and rationalistic ethos, live in landscapes filled with ghosts. The scenes we pass through each day are inhabited, possessed, by spirits we cannot see but whose presence we nevertheless experience.

What I am describing is not some lamentable lapse of the scientific mentality of our age, some last remnant of superstition that we need to root out of fallible minds. What I am describing is, I believe, a common feature of the human experience of place, for both modern and traditional peoples. The point of this essay is to argue that ghosts – that is, *the sense of the presence of those who are not physically there* – are a ubiquitous aspect of the phenomenology of place. Although the cultural language of modernity usually prevents us from speaking about their presence, we constitute a place in large measure by the ghosts we sense inhabit and possess it. The meaning of a place, its *genius loci*, depends upon the geniuses we locate there.

Who has not experienced that flood of images of people long gone, or people when they were younger, while revisiting an old "haunt," as we say? Who has not had that slightly chilly, and yet very warm, feeling of almost being able to see your friends from when you were eight dashing down the sidewalk as you walk through the neighborhood where you grew up? Who has not had that sense, while creeping into some room where one really should not have been, that someone unseen was watching? Ghosts also help constitute the specificity of historical sites, of the places where we feel we belong and do not belong, of the boundaries of possession by which we assign ownership and nativeness. Ghosts of the living and dead alike, of both individual and collective spirits, of both other selves and our own selves, haunt the places of our lives. Places are, in a word, personed – even when there is no one there.

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I offer this observation as a contribution to a young but growing scholarly endeavor: the sociology of place. The study of place has long been a domain frequented mainly, among social scientists, by geographers.[1] Until recently, sociologists have rarely given explicit attention to place, let alone space.[2] The literature on collective memory, for example, has explored the "localization" and "topography," as Maurice Halbwachs termed it, of remembrance in monuments and historical sites; but here the focus has been on the social construction of memory, not place itself.[3] Sociologists have long maintained a separate discipline for the study of "rural sociology," complete with separate departments in some universities and separate professional associations, the Rural Sociological Society. Despite the explicitly spatial basis of this division, and despite concentrating on themes such as environment and community, rural sociologists have seldom considered space and place as theoretical categories in their own right.[4]

Until recently, for there are signs of change. We now have Kai Erikson's studies of the trauma of loss of place among those affected by toxic pollution in their communities.[5] We have John Logan and Harvey Molotch's account of the urban growth machine, the economic vacuum cleaner that drives the constant battles over development waged between business elites and local people, which contains an explicit focus on place.[6] We have John Urry's analyses of the culture of tourism and the commodification of place.[7] We have Anthony Giddens's theory of what he terms "locale," the settings in which all social action must take place (pun intended).[8] And we have David Hummon and Lee Cuba's work on place attachment and the meaning of home.[9] Nevertheless, try a search through your local university library's data base on the keywords "place and sociology." In my own local university library, at least, such a search turns up only twelve entries, and most of those are works that use place as a metaphor (as in "the place of [blank] in [blank]"), and not works on the topic of place. Sociologists increasingly pay significant attention to space – to the spatial relations of social and economic life – although it would be safe to say that this, too, is still not a major theme in sociological research.[10]

Moreover, sociology has tended to offer a deaf ear to the geographers who have argued for the importance of place in social life. Place is a notoriously difficult concept to define, and therefore to pick up and inspect with the mental tweezers of an objective social science. No doubt the lack of sociological interest in place stems in part from the ineffable, subjective, and quasi-mystical character of the topic. There

must be something more to it, though, as sociologists have found worthwhile the study of many a concept whose definition few can agree upon – community, class, culture, just to list an alliterative few. Nicholas Entrikin has argued that that "something more" is the *specificity* of place. As Entrikin notes, "the scientific search for universals seems to trivialize the interest in the particularity of places" that geographers have long maintained.[11] So, too, with a modern culture and economy busy with the business of globalization, the geographer John Agnew has suggested.[12]

Place, argues Entrikin, "is best viewed from points in between" – in between the rock of objective generalization and the soft place of subjective particularism. This is what Entrikin calls the "betweenness" of place. That sounds right to me, right for both geographical and sociological approaches to place. We need a language for describing place, ineffable and quasi-mystical as it may be, that is general enough to be worth speaking about, but also provides a means for describing this particular, and often peculiar, experience.

I want to offer the language of the "ghosts" of place as such a concept in between. Ghosts are, I argue, ubiquitous in the places in which we live, and they give a life to those places. Ghosts are much of what makes a space a place. Yet as well, ghosts are terrically specific. "George Washington slept here," says many (probably too many) a historical marker, not somewhere else. The Mamie Doud Eisenhower birthplace is in Boone, Iowa, population 5,000 and dropping, and no Disneyesque inventions and interventions can ever change that. My father was born in his parents' bed in a wooden double-decker on Sackett Street on the south side of Providence, Rhode Island. Even though the building no longer stands, that spot will always be that spot for me, for only it is haunted by that particular and, to me, deeply personal ghost of my father as a baby; you will never sense that ghost as I do. Somebody's office is some body's office, and we sense that body's spirit there even when the body is not.

The language of ghosts that I develop here, then, is intended to give us a way to speak generally about the specificity of the meaning of place. We often use the word "ghosts" to refer to the scary spirits of the unsettled dead – to disturbed souls who came to a bad and frequently unjust end, and who haunt our anxious memories.[13] I use the term here in the broader sense of a felt *presence* – an anima, *geist*, or genius – that possesses and gives a sense of social aliveness to a place. Ghosts in

this broader sense may be unsettled and scary, but they can also be rooted, friendly, and affirming – and they are never dead, although they may be of the dead, as well as of the living. The ghosts of place may seem uncanny at times, but they are nevertheless a familiar and often homey part of our lives.[14]

I have been primarily drawn to the ghosts of place as a way to describe a central aspect of the social experience of the physical world, the phenomenology of environment. Such experience arises in part from the social relations of memory, and the memory of social relations. But the ghosts of place should not be reduced to mere memories, collective or individual. To do so would be to overlook the spirited and live quality of their presence, and their stubborn rootedness in particular places. Moreover, the ghosts of place are not only ghosts of the past; they can as well be of the present, and even the future. However we locate them temporally, the ghosts of place are always *presences* and as such appear to us as spirits of temporal transcendence, of connection between past and future.

In what follows, I first offer a theoretical justification for the concept of ghosts as a way to describe the social experience of the physical world. I then discuss the differences between various manners of ghosts that animate places. Much of the evidence I use is reflexive, that is, drawn from my own experience of place. This, of course, is not the usual source of evidence from which sociologists draw, for such evidence is so particular. The particularity of place, though, suggests no better source. I hope that the personal evidence I report will, however, recall to memory similar and related experiences on the part of the reader, building within the reader that empathetic confirmation upon which sociological understanding, Max Weber argued, always ultimately depends.[15] This, too, will be a way for me to give the betweenness of place its due. I conclude the article with some brief observations about the ontological status we should accord the ghosts of place.

Mixing souls with things

Sociologists have long recognized (although it is little discussed in contemporary literature) the widespread sense among the peoples of the world that things are often imbued with spirits and personified sentiments. Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Walter Benjamin each made closely related observations about the life we sometimes feel in

things. Durkheim noted, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life,* that the Arunta tribe of Australia experienced the sacred presence of their ancestors in certain rocks on the landscape. "These rocks and stones are considered the bodies or parts of the bodies of the ancestors, whose memory they keep alive; they represent them," Durkheim wrote.[16] Weber called it the "charisma" of the object – the sense of the presence of *mana* in a thing.[17] Walter Benjamin called it the "aura of the original" that we accord to works of art touched by the artist's own hand – "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be," in Benjamin's words – as opposed to the lifelessness of the same work mechanically reproduced.[18] Thus at least three major schools of sociological throught – Durkheimian, Weberian, and Marxist – share the observation that things sometimes contain a kind of life. And a fourth too: symbolic interactionism. Mead suggested that "it is possible for inanimate objects, no less than for other human organisms, to form parts of the generalized and organized – the completely socialized – other for any given human individual...." As he put it in another passage,

> We talk to nature: we address the clouds, the sea, the tree, and objects around us. We later abstract from that type of response because of what we come to know of such objects.

By "what we come to know," Mead was referring to our discovery that such objects do not talk back to us, at least not out loud. Consequently, we come to understand their responses abstractly. Mead goes on:

> The immediate response is, however, social.... We are taking the attitude of the physical things about us, and when we change the situation nature responds in a different way.[20]

All of these schools are describing aspects of what I have elsewhere called the "social experience of nature" – the way we experience the biophysical world around us through our inescapably social, and therefore deeply human, sensibilities.[21] And one of the deepest social sensibilities, it seems to me, is our sense that there is a kind of a quickening, an originating essence, within every person that we call by such names as a soul, a spirit, a *geist*, a ghost. If Durkheim is to be believed (and, as far as I know, no one has contradicted him on this), aside from a few cool-eyed Western scientific types, every people maintains a belief in the existence of a soul or closely related concept.[22] It is the sense of some motivating spirit within, some self-conscious and animating pres-

ence, that enables us to distinguish a living person from a rock, an android, a tree, a building, a sweater, a stapler, and to direct our interactions accordingly.

Except when we don't. For example, the Maori people of New Zealand, traditionally at least, used to say that gifts contain a *hau* (pronounced, I believe, like "how"), a spiritual power by which social connections and obligations come to reside within the gift itself. As Tamati Ranaipirir, a wise Maori man, once explained to a visiting anthropologist,

> Let me speak to you about the *hau*.... The *hau* is not the *hau* that blows – not at all.

Like the Latin word *spiritus*, the Maori word *hau* means both wind and spirit, and Tamati was trying to distinguish them.

> Let us suppose that you possess a certain article and that you give me this article. You give it to me without setting a price on it. We strike no bargain about it. Now, I give this article to a third person who, after a certain lapse of time, decides to give me some things as a payment in return.... It would not be fair on my part to keep these gifts for myself, whether they were desirable or undesirable. I must give them to you because they are a *hau* of the gifts that you gave me. If I kept these other gifts for myself, serious harm might befall me, even death. This is the nature of the *hau*, the *hau* of personal property, the *hau* of the gift, the *hau* of the forest. But enough on this subject.[23]

In other words, say you give me a book for my birthday. Later, I decide to give the book to someone else, having finished reading it. My next birthday, that someone else gives me two nice pairs of socks in return. Due to the *hau*, I should therefore give these socks to you, rather than keep them for myself.

The life-giving spirit of the world, the *hau* of the forest that traditional Maoris depended upon for sustenance, thus animates personal property and gifts as well. This spirit is conscious of the movement of physical articles, and in some senses may be said actually to reside within them, watching to make sure that the movement of each gift through a community is reciprocated. Marcel Mauss, from whom I take this example, interpreted this as showing how gifts bring a group together, causing it to celebrate its unity through the *hau* it shares, the *hau* that animates the whole world and thus the whole group itself. Moreover, through their sense of spirits, Maoris of this period (the early twentieth century)

attached particular people with particular articles. They remembered who gave what to whom, and, through the *hau*, the presence of that person within that article somehow lingered on.

Mauss gives the further example of the beaten copper plates exchanged in a traditional Kwakiutl potlatch. These plates had no instrumental value, but usually commanded the greatest exchange value at a potlatch – sometimes the equivalent of many hundreds of blankets – and were regarded with deep veneration. Interestingly, the value of these "coppers" went up with each potlatch they went through, with the oldest and most often exchanged coppers worth the most. It is as if each exchange resulted in the sedimentation of ever-more social sentiment, ever more spirits that came to be seen as residing in some way in a copper. As Mauss put it, "this represents an intermingling. Souls are mixed with things; things are mixed with souls."[24]

It is not only traditional peoples that mix souls with things. On my left hand I wear a golden band, inscribed "May Day, 1983," the date of my wedding. Were some experimentally minded social scientist to offer me an absolutely identical wedding band, inscribed in the identical manner, plus a twenty dollar bill, I would not take the trade. Not for a hundred dollars. Not for a thousand (I believe). The same would be true if someone were to offer me an identical sweater to the one my wife once knit for me, an identical couch to the one we got from my grandmother when she went into a nursing home, an identical statue to the one a Bri-Bri man from Costa Rica once gave me and that I will probably one day give to my son.[25]

We moderns still cultivate meaning in such domestic objects, and meaning of a particular kind: social meaning.[26] We sense in these objects – momentos, heirlooms, gifts we have received, gifts we intend to make – presences, presences that give these objects that "aura" Benjamin described, a kind of reverent particularity irreducible by reproduction, mechanical or otherwise. It is the aura of our web of social relations.

Mixing souls with spaces

From this recognition of our widespread sense of a presence in objects, it is, I believe, a short theoretical step to the recognition of the ghosts of place. Just as we often experience spirits in particular things, we

often experience spirits in particular spaces. In so doing, we give a space social meaning and thereby make it a place.[27]

When we, through ghosts, make space place, we treat that spirited space with ritual care. We approach it with more measured step. We find that its aura calls out from us our faculties of wonder. We resent as defilement practices that fail to do homage to the ghost or ghosts within – development projects being one large category of such defilements. Simply put, we treat a place as a shrine.

But why should the sense of ghostly presence lead us to make place a shrine? Indeed, to make the question even more general, why do we treat shrines like shrines? Whence comes this ritual behavior?

Erving Goffman, in a famous paper, noted that Westerners regard the individual as sacred, and therefore treat each individual as a kind of shrine. Within a certain distance of this shrine of self, we engage in particular behaviors of deference and appropriate demeanor, much as one would when approaching the altar in a Christian church or the Ark of the Covenant in a Jewish temple. Goffman suggested that we should understand these behaviors as religious rituals of a sort. As Goffman noted,

> The implication is that in one sense this secular world is not so irreligious as we might think. Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself stubbornly remains as a deity of considerable importance. He walks with some dignity and is the recipient of many little offerings. He is jealous of the worship due him, yet, approached in the right spirit, he is ready to forgive those who may have offended him.[28]

Yet the converse must also be true. Goffman's argument is that we treat the self as a shrine because we regard it as sacred. To leave the matter there, though, does not answer the general question of why sacredness should lead us to treat a particular object, body, or space in a shrine-like fashion. The answer I would propose is we treat shrines as sacred because we treat them as we do selves. Not only does the origin of the self stem from treating it as a shrine. The origin of a shrine comes from treating it as a self – an embodied ghost. What makes a shrine sacred is our sense that some self-conscious and originating essence, some spirit, inhabits and possesses it to some degree. We sense in a shrine the aura of an original, which requires that we maintain a certain respectful ritual distance no matter how close we come to it, as we do to a person.[29]

The same goes for place more generally. We approach particular spaces with the ritual distance of a shrine because we treat them as we do persons. We sense in both spirits – ghosts, within. The experience of place is the experience of people, and for us, nothing could be more holy.

Or unholy. The shrine of each individual is not always regarded as sacred, as Goffman noted. This quasi-religious presence may also be a profane one. As Goffman put it, continuing from the quotation above,

> Because of their status relative to his, some persons will find him contaminating while others will find that they contaminate him, in either case finding that they must treat him with ritual care.[30]

So, too, may the ghosts of place cause us to regard a particular space as profane. We may sense within a place ghosts that frighten us and disturb us, ghosts that make us feel unclean, ghosts that are at cross-purposes with our desires, ghosts (perhaps most importantly) whose spirit seems quite unlike our own. And as with persons that give us this sense, we will find that we must treat such places with ritual care, just as we do places whose ghosts we feel are sacred to us – albeit different practices of ritual care.

To summarize my argument: A crucial aspect of how we experience the person is our sense that the person has an animating spirit, a ghost, within. We also experience objects and places as having ghosts. We do so because we experience objects and places socially; we experience them as we do people. Through ghosts, we re-encounter the aura of social life in the aura of place.

I turn now to a few sketches drawn from my own experiences that illustrate and elaborate the argument.

Sketch one: Grenadier Island, St. Lawrence River

Every summer I make a trip to the Thousand Islands section of the St. Lawrence River, the great rock-bound river that drains the Great Lakes and hosts upon its banks the cities of Montreal and Quebec. The Thousand Islands lie in the first forty miles of the St. Lawrence after it leaves Lake Ontario, and various branches of my family have summer places there. In fact, I have been there every summer of my life. So has my mother, and her mother before her, and her father

before her, and his mother and grandmother before him. Dating all the way back to my great-great-great grandmother Jemima Fish, my family has been resident, either for the summer or year-round, on Grenadier Island in the St. Lawrence, and for most of that time on Grenadier Island's geographic mate, Tar Island, as well. Jemima Fish married the first settler on Grenadier Island in the 1840s and took up residence on one of the island's ten or so farms. None of the farms remains today, and no one lives there year round anymore. Today, Grenadier is about half Canadian national park. The rest is covered with a smattering of summer cottages, as is Tar Island.

For me, Grenadier Island is filled with ghosts – some that others probably feel and some that few others do, if anyone at all. Some of these that others as well feel are ghosts in the more limited sense – imagined spirits of the dead. Every summer, if the weather is right, we like to walk two miles down toward the end of the island to visit Grenadier's little graveyard. It's a dramatic, lonely spot on a small promontory overlooking the river, with enough sand for digging graves. On the kind of cool and stormy day that keeps the mosquitoes down enough for anyone to get there – there's a buggy section in the middle of the island, and you have to walk through it on the way – the Grenadier graveyard is a very affecting place. Standing amongst the old head-stones it would be a rare person that would not sense some kind of imagined presence of those who are not physically there – some kind of sacred electric charge about the place. This is probably particularly true for those who have relatives or friends (the graveyard is still active, and receives perhaps one new burial a year) buried there. I know I get a particularly eerie feeling when I stand in front of Jemima Fish's stone.

Ghosts also inhabit the abandoned one-room school house that sits off to one side of the dirt road that leads to the graveyard. Parks Canada now owns the site, and they have put up a sign about the school's history, although they have made little effort to maintain the building, which is in serious disrepair. When we walk by we always think of the bright voices of island children dashing around the building at recess time. We can almost see them, we sometimes say to each other. We think about our friend Philip who went to the school in its last years, and we try to imagine Philip in the school. We peer in the shuttered windows and make jokes about the school marm coming after us with her switch for being so insolent as to peek.

I'm not *just* being romantic about this place, which is obviously so centrally important to me. This romanticism is, I submit, a real human experience, one that is widespread and specific to particular places. Probably most of us have such places. My purpose here is to present for analysis one of the places I know, I sense, best.

The ghost of Philip at the old school raises an important point for our analysis. The ghosts of place include not only ghosts of the dead, but also ghosts of the living – often the living when they were at a quite different period of their lives. Thus, in a way, such ghosts of the living are also ghosts of past lives. And as I walk around Grenadier and Tar Islands, I see many such ghosts of the past lives of the living. I see the dock at my grandmother's cottage, and I can imagine my mother as a little girl diving off the end of it into the warm waters of summer (but often not nearly warm enough!) just as I prepare to dive off myself. I can see my grandmother sitting next to my grandfather (actually he's dead now, although she is not) on the front porch, watching over the kids splashing in the water, and it brings tears to my eyes just to write this sentence about it. I can see my brothers running over the rocks, fishing off the seawall, and lying in the hammock that we used to set up between two big pines.

And I can see myself, my own ghost as a child, running, fishing, swimming, and lying in the hammock, too. As I row past the patch of tall rushes just off Tar Island, I can see me as a young boy exploring that patch, trying to catch sight of a school of carp that had rustled the waters there. In so many places in those islands, I can feel my own presence as a child, even though that child is no longer physically there. The ghosts we sense in places, in other words, may also include our own ghost, the ghost or ghosts of our own past lives.

The ghosts of place may also include the ghosts of present and future lives. Not only do I feel my past ghosts in these islands, I feel the presence of my present ghost and the ghosts of my future selves. I have a deep personal association that, while based in part on my memories of my past, I sense continuing into today and tomorrow. I can feel myself today in places on the river where I am not, and I can see my own self as an old man sitting on that same front porch where my grandfather and grandmother once sat, presences that connect the self across time.

When we sense our own ghost in a place we are likely to experience thereby a deep sense of *belonging* to that place. Just as a place may feel possessed by our own ghost or ghosts, so we may feel that that place is a special possession of ours, through our ghost. The metaphor of being "possessed" by a ghost is, at the very least, a particularly apt one in this instance, and may be no accident. We attach our spirits to a place, and thus that place is attached to us. We animate it in our imaginations, we construct it in our minds, with the spirit we sense in our own person, just as we sense spirits in others. The place possesses us, and we possess it; we belong to the place, and the place belongs to us.

Although individually felt, the ghosts of personal belonging are a social response. To feel, imagine, think about, or talk about something "means to connect within a single system of ideas our opinions as well as those of our circle," as Maurice Halbwachs observed.[31] Through my ghosts of belonging, I place myself in relation to others and their ghosts of belonging, ghosts that they have told me about or that I have otherwise sensed on my own. Ghosts of belonging are ghosts of kinship. We also place ourselves in relation to a physical place through our ghosts of belonging, feeling a tie of kinship with that place and corresponding feelings of relative lack of kinship with other places. We experience thereby a social tie with the physical world, animating an otherwise inanimate realm.

The spirits I sense in this stretch of the Thousand Islands are not, however, purely *individual* ghosts. There is also, for me, a ghost of the *collective* – the ghost of my family, so long in these islands.[32] This area feels to me like *our* area, and there is a sense of general and rightful possession that I believe all the family members share when they look out on the scene. It is collectively ours – not ours alone, of course, for there are several other families who have been in this area for years. But we do, rightly or wrongly, have a sense that, while new families are welcome, this is more our area then theirs. In our view, their ghosts are not so collectively in possession of these waters as are ours, and to us they are not (and this is not a generous nor even a just feeling) as rightfully entitled to this place as are we.[33]

The division between ghosts of individuals and ghosts of a collective is not a clear one. When I sense the unseen presence of Jemima Fish, for example, I know that this ghost is connected to me, and I to her ghost. The connection of both to a larger collective ghost is a large part of the significance of her ghost for me. I find my ghosts significant because of

their social relations, because of their web of social connections across space and time. This stretch of the Thousand Islands takes on great significance for me – and for others in my family who similarly return year after year – in part because all these ghosts to which we feel a spatial and temporal social connection are to be found in this one area. I can think of no area that, for us, has a similar concentration of ghosts to which we feel such close social connections. Thus, each individual ghost I sense here I place, even if in a largely tacit way, in a dense social network of ghosts, all constituting and partaking of a larger collective spirit.

Sketch two: East Hall, Iowa State University

The building where I work is about a hundred years old, one of the oldest on my campus. And it is filled with ghosts. When I first arrived here, people delighted in telling me stories of who had had which office at various times. Not surprisingly, I heard the most about those who had previously been in my own office. Two of the previous occupants came by and made a special point of telling me about how they had arranged the room when it was theirs and changes they had made that one could still see, such as the hanging of a black board or the building of the bookshelves that run quite a way up toward the thirteen-foot high ceiling.

But why should they bother to tell me such things? Why should they care enough about such matters to inform me of them; why should they assume that I would care about them myself? Nothing they could say could change the room materially, apart, I suppose, from some advice on how I might set up the room. (It is a somewhat cramped and awkward space that has required some ingenuity on the part of everyone who has used it to make it into a decent office.) Informing me about who had had the bookshelves installed could not change the instrumental value of those shelves to me or to them.

These conversations were not merely about instrumental matters. I was being told about the ghosts in my office. I was being told by others that they still felt a sentimental attachment to that room, that they still possessed it and it possessed them to some degree. And when my mind is wandering from my work, I have sometimes imagined those two previous occupants reaching for a book off one of the highest shelves or engaged in earnest consultation with a student.

I don't do it as often now, though. These ghosts are fading, at least for me. To some extent this is because – and I hope this does not constitute carrying the metaphor of "ghosts" for describing the social experience of place too far – I have engaged in a number of rituals of exorcism. I have given the office a thorough cleaning on several occasions (although anyone who saw the current state of my office might easily doubt that), and swept up the dust, the old pencils, and the scraps of paper that had fallen behind the furniture. I took out the air conditioner (I don't like them), got rid of all but one file cabinet (I don't like filing either), installed a desk-top light (I don't like overhead florescent ones), and moved the desk to under the window (I do like sunlight). These changes were about more than personal preferences. They were also about infusing the preferences of my person, my ghost, in the material environment of that room, that interior place, and exorcising the ghosts of others. These changes, then, were more than an act of exorcism; they were a means for me to imbue my office with a new ghost: my own.

Some ghosts are associated with such compelling specificity to a space that they cannot be exorcised by merely moving the furniture around and doing some dusting. A graduate student a number of years ago is reputed to have committed suicide somewhere on the fourth floor of East Hall where the graduate student offices still are. Current students make somewhat edgy jokes about this "genuine" ghost of East Hall, and one student has reported to me her rather shivery feelings about that unseen presence. The ancient belief in the release of the soul upon death, and its tendency to lurk about if that death was unsatisfactory or unjust in some way, is one continuing dimension of the social experience of place.

Such a ghost may have visited my office. A close friend of mine had suddenly died, leaving behind his wife, two young children, and a career that was just showing signs of taking off and making an important social contribution. The circle of those who knew him felt his death to be not only a great loss but a terrible injustice. On the day he died, but before I had learned of his death, I was at work and spent the whole afternoon in my office. Finally, near the end of the day, I stepped out for perhaps five minutes. When I returned, I discovered a small crowd outside my door. Those high bookshelves had collapsed in my absence, showering the floor with books and papers and an old iron rotating fan weighing some twenty-five pounds which I had foolishly stored on the top shelf – and which landed quite close to my desk.

There had been no earthquake, no nearby construction work, nothing understandable to cause the fall. (The carpenter who later came to fix them said he had seen track shelving pull away from a wall, but never collapse like these had done, leaving the tracks intact.) It was incredibly fortunate that the shelves had fallen during the only minutes when I was out of the office. Colleagues pitched in to help me clean up, and we made nervous jokes about imaginary headlines like "Scholar Killed by Avalanche of Books." We all put it down as "just one of those things."

That evening, though, when I learned of my friend's death, I found myself almost immediately making an association. Had my friend's ghost come to complain about his unjust fate? Had he been warning me not to work so hard lest the same happen to me? I struggled with the irrationality of this association. Even though I don't believe in *that* kind of ghost, there was something queer about the whole incident, I felt, as did others in my friend's circle when they heard the story. Ultimately, my rational sensibility was satisfied by the recognition that it was not until after I learned of the death that I came to sense this ghost. It was my sense of grief and my sense of the injustice of my friend's death that later conjured up for me this unsettling ghost of place.[34] Yet even though I have a rational explanation, I still feel that ghost sometimes.

East Hall also has some non-human ghosts. Today East Hall houses the sociology department of Iowa State University, but it was built as a dairy science building. (We're a land grant school.) Apparently, or so the local story goes, many of the current offices used to be laboratories for studying dairy animals, and cows used to frequent the building (goats too, probably, although I've never heard anyone mention that possibility). Intriguingly, the floors of several offices slope towards the center of the room, as if a laboratory drain were once there to carry away spilled milk. When people tell these stories about their office, and point to the gently sloping floor, the mind's eye quickly conjures up the delightfully absurd image of ghostly cows among the books and computers. Thus animals too are animated by spirits that we may attach to places.

For all its faults as a modern academic facility (the faculty often complain about its many short-comings) East Hall is a many-storied building. The stories people tell about it revolve around unseen presences that continue to haunt the halls. It is a building with "character," as someone on my floor described it to me once. Those who use East Hall

experience it as a spirited social space, thus making it truly a building for sociology.

Sketch three: Three castles

The ghosts of place are not only a matter of social sentiment, however. They are also commodities, and increasingly so. The very specificity of auras makes ghosts prime candidates for becoming what the economist Fred Hirsch called "positional goods" – goods whose supply is, through social processes, inherently limited and that thus confer honor and value upon those who have control of them.[35] Hirsch had in mind such goods as lakefront homes or houses with good views, which have built into their definition factors that limit supply. There is only so much lakefront shoreline in the world, so lakefront homes are a commodity whose supply we cannot increase beyond a certain point; the same for "good" views. The ghosts of place are even more suited to this kind of commodification of the environment, for the George-Washington-slept-here specificity of their location drastically limits their supply. Yet few spaces are totally devoid of ghosts, and so the ghosts of place nevertheless are, for all their inherent supply limits, simultaneously widely available.

In recent years, a huge and still-burgeoning heritage industry has grown up around this form of good.[36] Boldt Castle in the Thousand Islands is one of thousands of similar examples. I visit it most years. This 120-room fantasy castle was built between 1894 and 1904 by George C. Boldt, then manager of New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, but never completely finished. About a year before Boldt's family was to take up residence in the castle, Boldt's wife Louise died and he sent a telegram ordering all work stopped. As the tourist brochure for the castle puts it, "Today visitors wander in awe through the huge, empty rooms, imagining the luxury, splendor, and gaiety that might have been." Displays throughout the castle show old photos of the workers and explain how they accomplished some of the trickier parts of the castle construction. Adjacent to the main castle building is a small stone tower built first. Here the family actually did live for several summers, and guides on duty there describe for visitors how the family used the building.

In all these ways – through the brochure, the displays, the guides – the castle's current owner, the Thousand Islands Bridge Authority, tries to

summon up the ghosts of the place for tourists. The poor state of repair of much of the castle adds to its ghostly romance. The Bridge Authority's success in summoning these ghosts, combined with the thrill of the boat ride required to get to the small island on which the castle sits, has made for a popular attraction that forms the centerpiece of the Thousand Islands tourist trade. Dozens of campgrounds and motels, several small towns' worth of restaurants and souvenir shops, tourboat lines, and marinas depend upon the traffic drawn by the castle for a good bit of their trade, and the Bridge Authority (which is a joint U.S. and Canadian government organization) runs the castle for that express purpose.

The Tower of London is a hugely successful version of this same commodification of ghosts; at least we found it so when we visited it in the summer of 1994. (The fact that the Tower of London is owned by the British government has not prevented the institution of a stiff entrance fee nor a range of associated tourist businesses that trade on this commodification.) The Tower of London, of course, is haunted by some of the world's most famous "genuine" ghosts: Henry VI, Sir Thomas More, the Princes in the Tower, and Anne Boleyn. There is a small sign on the Tower Green informing the reader that upon this very spot stood the scaffold and block for many of the Tower's over one-hundred beheadings. It is hard to read such a sign and not feel some kind of presence around you, some kind of charge in the air.

The Tower of London, like many large historic tourist sites, has a large staff of costumed guides in period dress. The Tower's Yeoman Warders with their early seventeenth-century dress are almost as much a British icon as the Tower itself. The Tower also has a number of other interpreters in the costumes of various periods, and they often talk to visitors in period speech and try to engage them in various imaginative reconstructions of period activities. The visitor knows that the costumed guides are not ghosts, of course, but their presence assists in the mental construction of the apparitions of place.

Yet these efforts are not always successful, not for me at any rate. That same summer we had occasion to travel in Ireland and visited the "Bunratty Castle and Folk Park – A Window on the Past," as it styles itself, in County Clare. The castle itself was built in 1425 and "authentically restored in 1954 to its former mediaeval splendor," according to the brochure for the site. Tourists can buy tickets to nightly mediaeval banquets in the banquet hall. Adjacent to the castle, Shannon

Heritage, the regional development authority that owns the site, has "tellingly recreated" a turn-of-the-century Irish village complete with pub, school, shops, farm houses, and the like.

Still, at least for us – and we are great fans of a good castle – Bunratty did not cut it. Something was missing, and I believe that something was ghosts. The tellingly recreated village seemed false to us. As is common in many historical theme parks, the buildings were truly old and had been moved to the site from all over the surrounding countryside. But their new layout was wrong – the village seemed suburban with its perfectly curved streets – and there was an overly-precious lifelessness to the perfectly restored period shops, filled with newly-made "authentic" consumables. It was a dead, rootless place for all its attempts to appear rooted and alive. Moreover, a wrong turn in the village brought us head on into the rushing stream of a just-emptied tour bus, which chased away the few mediaeval and turn-of-the-century ghosts we had begun to sense. A few staff members wandered around in period dress, but they glowered resentfully at my five-year old when he asked them questions. The place had none of the right spirits. There is more to the cultivation of ghosts than the mere age of the spaces and objects.

But why were we, and so many others, looking for these spirits? Let me suggest a sweeping generalization. The market forces that have rolled so relentlessly across the landscape of the world over the past century or so, and with great acceleration since World War II, have systematically sought to sever the ties between ghosts and places. Seeking to wrest control of places from the ghostly and particular authority of social sentiment, the market has vigorously pursued the new, the mechanical, the universal. When the ghosts are gone, there can be no counter claims about what is the appropriate use, care, and ritual for what has now been reduced to location, location, and location. What the rise of the heritage industry may suggest is that we are coming to miss our old ghosts, to resist the loss of sentimental and social connections to places and thus, ultimately, to ourselves – and our selves.[37]

The reality of ghosts

What I have been describing is, of course, highly subjective, highly particular, highly unreplicable evidence about the experience of place. I make no apologies for my method, for this is, I submit, much of what

we need to recognize about the character of the social experience of place. Ghosts are social phenomena, as I argue here, and yet still particular. There are regularities in this particular experience, though. The experience of ghosts in particular places, whether these ghosts be sacred or profane, individual or collective, dead or alive, mine or yours, human or animal, past or present or future, is not happenstance. Ghosts have good reasons to haunt the specific places they do. These reasons derive ultimately from the character of our social experience, as mediated by the landscape upon which that experience unfolds.

As Wendy Griswold has written, "the meanings attributed to any cultural object are fabrications, woven from the symbolic capacities of the object itself and from the perceptual apparatus of those who experience the object."[38] Although there are definite regularities in social experience, and thus in the social experience of place, the ghosts of place retain stubborn and quirky singularities. The spatial object world in which ghosts reside is too variable, too restricted by its own symbolic capacities to allow for the universalization of a manner of place. For all the many ghosts of East Hall, Grenadier Island, and the Tower of London, each has ghosts that the others are simply not suited to possess. And none of us has equal experience of places: Lives are not constituted in that way. Consequently, for all their ubiquity, there is an irreducible particularity to the ghosts of place that makes them something forever in-between.

Yet can we call real anything so particular, so subjective, so nonmaterial? William I. Thomas's well-known aphorism, that if people believe a thing to be true then it is real in its consequences, provides one obvious answer.[39] The ghosts of place are, of course, fabrications, products of imagination, social constructions. The ghosts we find in places are always our ghosts, that is, ghosts of our own imaginations. Because they are our ghosts, what we make of them is what counts. They may conjure up in places, but it is only people who can conjure them up. Although we generally experience ghosts as given to us, it is we that give ghosts to places. They do not exist on their own. The particularity of place puts constraints on the ghosts that are likely to appear; there is not, to adapt a phrase from Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, a ghostly free-for-all.[40] Yet we have reasons for conjuring up the ghosts that do appear. These reasons and the ghosts that result have real consequences for social life.

The consequences I have stressed throughout are the ways that the ghosts of place connect us across time and space to the web of social life. We experience places as we do people, and conversely. We experience in places the sentiments of sociality, sentiments of liking and disliking, trust and fear, renewal and loss, connection and disconnection, belongingness and foreignness, justice and injustice.[41] We also experience in places the material interests of "sociality" for our sentiments depend largely upon our interests – and vice versa.[42] Our sense of the rightful possession of a place depends in part upon our sense of the ghosts that possess it, and the connections of different people to those ghosts. From feelings of local identity to the possession of office space, from conflicts over development to the land claims of native people, from the ethnic and religious conflicts of Bosnia and Northern Ireland to those of Jerusalem and Montreal, ghosts make claims about the territories of social life. Ghosts are political. The possession of a place by ghosts thus is not a non-material phenomenon.

The ghosts of place are invisible to our current science. No laboratory instrument, no metered machine, no photographic negative will ever detect them. But we should have no doubt that they are, still, very real. Despite the mechanized aloofness of the modern mind, despite the increased cultivation of *mammon* in place of the cultivation of *mana*, despite the cool distance of the bourgeois self – despite all these, the world as yet remains an enchanted place.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the illuminating discussions about ghosts and place that I had with the members of my fall 1994 course on Community and the 1995 attendees of Wendy Griswold's remarkable seminar series on Culture and Society at the University of Chicago, where I first presented these ideas. The reviewers and editors at *Theory and Society* pointed me toward some important clarifications. No less significant have been the reactions and input I have received from Jeff Sharp, Peggy Petrzelka, David Lowenthal, my wife Diane B. Mayerfeld, and my mother Laura S. Bell. Their spirits are in this article.

Notes

1. For a review, see Nicholas Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1991).
2. This observation has been made most forcefully by John A. Agnew and James S. Duncan, editors, *The Power of Place: Bringing Together Geographical and Sociological Imaginations* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Entrikin, *Betweenness*; and Linda Labao, "The Place of 'Place' in Current Sociological Research," *Environment and Planning A* 26 (1994): 665–668. It is also worth, as a note, making some distinction between what I mean by space and by place. Space refers to the three-dimensional coordinates of things. A place is a particular space that has meaning. But this difference should not be reified. Like most categorical distinctions, this too falls apart at the margins, for even the merest recognition of coordinates is a form of meaning, of *placement*. Perhaps it would be better to say that, in what follows, when I speak of place I am emphasizing issues of meaning more than I would be if I were speaking of space.
3. See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory,* Lewis Coser, editor and translator, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1941 and 1952]); John R. Gillis, editor, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, N.J. and London: Transaction, 1994); Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a difficult past," *American Journal of Sociology* 97 (1991): 376–420; and others.
4. See Labao, "Place."
5. See Kai T. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), and Kai T. Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble:* Explorations in Diaster, Trauma, and Community (New York: Norton, 1994).
6. See John Logan and Harvey Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
7. See John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990) and John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).
8. See Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).
9. See David M. Hummon, *Commonplaces: Community Ideology and Identity in American Culture* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), and Lee Cuba and David M. Hummon, "A Place to Call Home: Identification with Dwelling, Community, and Region," *The Sociological Quarterly* 34/1 (1993): 111–131.
10. Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton's *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993), a study of housing segregation and its role in isolating (and creating) poverty in the urban core, is a case in point. See also Anthony Giddens, *Constitution*, and his concept of "time-space distanciation." Probably the most developed research tradition on the sociology of space is the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein and the older dependency theory of Andre Gundar Frank; see Wallerstein's *The Capitalist World-Economy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and Gundar Frank's *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution* (New York and London: Monthly Review, 1969). Although it is not often seen this way, Erving Goffman's work on the regions of interpersonal interaction is based on a very

sophisticated vision of the sociology of space; see especially Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959). There is also the tradition of human ecology, although this literature has largely fallen out of fashion in recent years.

11. Entrikin, *Betweenness,* 3.
12. See John A. Agnew, *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987).
13. For a stimulating critique of attempts to repress the ghosts of injustice, and for one of the few sustained sociological analyses of ghosts, I strongly recommend Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). For one of the few philosophical treatments of ghosts, and for another powerful call for justice for ghosts, see Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994). I, too, offer this work in the spirit of justice for ghosts. Neither Gordon nor Derrida, however, focus on the implications of ghosts for place.
14. In his essay on "The Uncanny," *On Creativity and the Unconscious,* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958 [1919]), 122–161, Freud misses this point. For Freud, the *unheimlich* – what is conventionally translated from the original German as the "uncanny" but whose German root also carries the sense of the unhome-like – is only a matter of anxiety. He thus concentrates his discussion on scary powers that we imagine in the world, similar to bad dreams. The affirming, friendly, and familiar ghosts of home are not a concern of Freud's. The centerpiece of the essay is an analysis of an opera by Offenbach, based on Heinrich Hoffman's story of "The Sand-Man," a figure who comes in the night and steals the eyes of children who won't go to bed by putting hot sand in their eyes until they pop out. Freud characteristically attempts to relate all such stories to the anxieties that stem from "repressed infantile complexes" (157) such as the castration-complex, narcissism, and morbid anxiety. As Gordon (*Ghostly,* 52) points out, even Freud is troubled by the difficulty of fitting all instances of *unheimlich* ghosts into this scheme, let alone homey ghosts.
15. On the use of empathy in sociological reasoning, see Max Weber, *Economy and Society,* Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, editors (Berkeley: University of California, 1968 [1920–22]), 4–6. For arguments in support of systematic self-observation as legitimate sociological evidence, see Carolyn Ellis, "Sociological Introspection and Emotional Experience," *Symbolic Interaction* 14/1 (1993): 23–50, and Carolyn Ellis and Michael G. Flaherty, editors *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience* (Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage, 1992). For a pragmatic argument in favor of methodological pluralism in the sociology of culture, see Wendy Griswold, "The Sociology of Culture: Four Good Arguments (and One Bad One)," *Acta Sociologica* 35 (1992): 323–328.
16. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965 [1915]), 368.
17. Weber, *Economy,* 400–401.
18. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations,* Hannah Arendt, editor, and Harry Zohn, translator (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968).
19. George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist,* Charles Morris, editor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1967 [1934]), 154.
20. Ibid., 184.

21. Michael M. Bell, *Childerley: Nature and Morality in a Country Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.
22. Durkheim, *Elementary*, 273.
23. I take this quotation, slightly altered for clarity by translating a few words left in Maori in the original and putting one word in English back into Maori, from Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, W. D. Hall, translator (New York and London: Norton 1990 [1950]), 11.
24. Ibid., 20. By contrast, take the exchange of antiques in Western countries. In most cases, the closer an antique is to its "original condition," as the expression goes, the higher its value. Original condition here seems in part to be a way of guaranteeing that an antique has been little used, and thus how little it is mixed with the souls of others. In fact, special value is typically accorded antiques that are still in their "original box" and have "never been used." We in the West do often mix souls with things, however, as the following passages argue.
25. The Bri-Bri are a tribe of native Americans who mainly live near Costa Rica's Panamanian border.
26. I take the metaphor of "cultivating" meaning from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton's classic study, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
27. One could equally well reverse this argument. Not only are places spirited objects fixed in space, but also spirited objects are, if you will, portable places. See note 2 for an explanation of the difference between space and place.
28. Erving Goffman, "The Nature of Deference and Demeanor," in *Interaction Ritual* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967 [1956], 47–95. Goffman wrote with the gender specificity of another time.
29. Goffman's account of the rise of rituals of individualism is thus somewhat misplaced. All peoples, traditional and modern alike, sense a spirit within the person, and thus attach ritual significance to the person. What is probably distinctive about modernity is that this spirit is increasingly seen as an individual spirit, rather than a collective one.
30. Goffman, "Deference," 95.
31. Halbwachs, *Collective,* 53.
32. It is probably worth pointing out as an aside that a collective ghost does not necessarily have to be sensed by a collective. A single individual may sense a collective ghost, just as a collective may sense an individual ghost, as well as a collective one. For an account of what I would regard as a debate within a collective over the sensing of a collective ghost, see Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, "Vietnam," on the cultural politics of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.
33. This feeling is, I believe, common among the adherents of territorial nationalism. I do not mean to suggest, however, that such feelings emerge only out of sentimental attachments. In most circumstances, material interests are also involved, even though believers in the territorial ghosts of nationalism may not consciously experience these interests in the ghosts they sense. See the discussion on material interests in the last section of this article.
34. Gordon, *Ghostly,* provided the theoretical hint for this analysis.
35. See Fred Hirsch, *The Social Limits to Growth* (London: Routledge, 1977).
36. For a wondrous and trenchant overview of the twists and turns of the construction of heritage, commercialized and otherwise, see David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). For a bracing critique of the use of heritage to justify just about anything, see

Lowenthal's *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (London: Penguin, 1997.) See also the discussion of the politics of ghosts at the conclusion of this paper.

37. As Jacques Derrida argues in *Spectres*, the critique of capitalism must pay attention not only to materialist implications but also to spiritual ones.
38. Wendy Griswold, "The Fabrication of Literary Meaning," *American Journal of Sociology* 92 (1987): 1077–1117. For a closely related argument, see the concept of "resonance" in Bell, *Childerley.*
39. William I. Thomas, *Social Behavior and Personality: Contributions of W. I. Thomas to Theory and Social Research*, E. H. Volkart, editor (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1951), 80.
40. Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames*, 17, observes concerning collective memory that the process of social construction "is not a discursive free-for-all."
41. I would like to thank Wendy Griswold for pointing out to me the element of loss in the experience of the ghosts of place.
42. For a detailed theoretical account of the interplay of interests and sentiments, see my "The Dialectic of Solidarities, or, Why the Lion Spared Androcles," *Sociological Focus* (in press).