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Edinburgh"

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The 'Drenched Lady' of St. Cuthbert's Churchyard, Edinburgh

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Abstract

This essay draws on one specific Edinburgh ghost story to explore the relationship between ghosts and collective memory, as well as oral histories and community belonging. I argue that the ghost story represents an 'unpacified remainder' in Edinburgh's social memory. Furthermore, the story's exclusively oral retelling generates a sense of 'belonging' through time and renders it inseparable from the wider community networks in which it is transmitted.

Keywords: Ghosts, history, oral traditions, collective memory, kinship, identity

On a night spent chatting around a kitchen table with some friends, the conversation turned to ghost stories. My friend Stephanie told us about the 'Drenched Lady', a spectral woman who is often spotted between the end of Princes Street Gardens and a smaller burial area in St. Cuthbert's Churchyard. Interestingly, this was a story I had never heard before despite my participation in many ghost tours. Moreover, I could not find a written record of this story, although upon asking others it seems to be relatively well known. This essay will argue that the ghost of the 'Drenched Lady' does not represent a Freudian (1919: 241) 'return' of a 'repressed' past. Instead, her ghost reflects what Schindel (2013: 260) calls the 'unpacified remainder'. Her haunting showcases the 'everyday' lives overlooked in official histories, and illustrates changes that have taken place in Edinburgh's material constitution. Additionally, I contend that the story's oral retelling makes it inseparable from the wider community and social networks it is transmitted in. Ghost stories such as that of the 'Drenched Lady' therefore generate a sense of belonging through time, rooted in the material landscape of the city.

Stephanie's account of the 'Drenched Lady' tells of a seventeenth century woman living in what is now Edinburgh's Old Town. Her husband died while she was pregnant with their first child. Her widowhood meant that she found herself living in very poor conditions. As a result, her child died shortly after she gave birth. The baby was buried in Bairn's Knowe, a gravesite for children in what is now St. Cuthbert's Churchyard. Sick with grief, she began to behave erratically and was quickly accused of witchcraft and thrown into the Nor Loch (now Princes Street Gardens) where she drowned. To this day, anyone walking in the Churchyard alone by night may see her. She wears a white nightgown, dripping with water, and cries as she crawls back and forth between her place of death in the Nor Loch to her baby's grave at Bairn's Knowe.

At first glance, a Freudian (1919: 241) analysis would seem to fit the story of the 'Drenched Lady'. The presence of a ghostly woman having suffered a 'traumatic' life and death at the hands of the society she lived in could be interpreted as a kind of 'return'. The story would seem to suggest the 'coming back' of a gruesome past that has been repressed out of Edinburgh's conscious collective memory (Olick, 2007: 21-25). However, I argue that a Freudian interpretation of the 'Drenched Lady' story does not go far enough.

A Freudian understanding of the 'Drenched Lady' would suggest that there are some aspects to her story that have otherwise been 'repressed' in Edinburgh's collective memory. These aspects then 'return' via haunting. Olick (2007: 22) offers an important counterargument to this assertion by questioning Freud's theory that 'repression-latency-return' patterns in individual neurotic patients unfold in the same way within in wider society. Additionally, I argue that the 'traumatic' history present in the 'Drenched Lady' story is not actually being 'repressed' at all. The poor living conditions and frequent accusations and executions of alleged witches in Early Modern Edinburgh are widely known and spoken about, sometimes even exaggerated (Goodare, 2003).

In light of this, I contend that the 'Drenched Lady' reflects what Schindel (2013: 260) calls an 'unpacified remainder', rather than a 'return of the repressed'. In her exploration of ghost stories surrounding ex-Clandestine Detention Centres (CDCs) in Argentina, Schindel explains that the protagonists of ghost stories are generally 'average' people employed in the exCDCs as construction workers or security guards (2013: 250). She also maintains that these ghost stories do not intend to dispute 'master interpretations' of the past (2013: 260). Instead, they reveal gaps and oversights in official explanatory narratives. The 'Drenched Lady' of St. Cuthbert's Churchyard can also be said to do exactly this. Hers is a story of the 'everyday' person living in Early Modern Edinburgh whose individual experience is otherwise overlooked in 'official' histories. The 'everyday' is revealed in key aspects of her story. She specifically wears a white nightgown, grounding her in social habits and routines that are familiar across time. In line with Edensor's (2008: 326) ethnography of derelict working class spaces in Manchester, I argue that it is precisely the Drenched Lady's 'mundanity' that makes her ghost particularly important. The 'circadian rhythms' in her story, particularly in her back-and-forth returning to a grave, suggest a timeless presence that transcends 'official' history itself.

Furthermore, to see the 'Drenched Lady' as merely a 'return of the repressed' is to ignore the specific importance of place in her story. In his Manchester ethnography, Edensor (2008:325) contends that spectres are raised when the modern quiescence of certain locations contrasts with their dramatic

histories. This is the case with the 'Drenched Lady' as well. What is specific to her story and her name is that she is dripping with water from the Nor Loch, now replaced by Princes Street Gardens. She represents the 'absent presence' of that which is no longer visible in material evidence (Edensor, 2008: 324). Therefore, rather than showcasing 'repression', the story of the 'Drenched Lady' of St. Cuthbert's Churchyard seeks to fill the 'voids and silences' existing in 'official' histories and the material landscape of Edinburgh (Schindel, 2013: 260).

The exclusively oral retransmission of the 'Drenched Lady's' story makes it inseparable from wider social webs of community that exist in the city. In their evocation of 'everyday' familiarity, I argue that ghost stories such as this one create a sense of community belonging and continuity through time.

Despite many of my other friends confirming the 'Drenched Lady' as an established Edinburgh ghost story, I could not find any written records for it. This gives support to Olick's (2007: 25) assertion that oral histories are vectors for the transmission of collective memory. Orally sharing the story of the 'Drenched Lady' also fits with the way ghost stories around Argentine ex-CDCs are told as well. Schindel (2013: 249) explains that the stories she received were always voiced by people who had heard from others, never those who had witnessed the incident themselves. This further supports my claim that ghost stories such as that of the 'Drenched Lady' seek to redress gaps in the historical representation of 'everyday' people.

In addition to this, however, the transmission of these stories relies on existing social networks of community around the places they unfold in. Carsten (2007: 18) contends that a sense of place is inextricably linked with kinship and memory. Bell (1997: 816) suggests that 'ghosts of place' bridge the gap between past and future, connecting those in contact with it to larger webs of social life across time and space. As a result, the telling of ghost stories creates a sense of belonging that is inseparable from place. I argue that the 'Drenched Lady' is one such 'ghost of place'. Her story would not make sense outside of the particular context of Edinburgh, the Nor Loch, and Bairn's Knowe. Its oral retelling thus generates the sense of belonging described by Bell (1997: 824). Those hearing and repeating the story become a part of extra-temporal webs of sociality and community rooted in place.

Furthermore, in his ethnography on ghosts of war in Vietnam, Kwon (2008: 19) suggests that individual apparitions of the dead reflect the collective concerns of the living. The ghost of the 'Drenched Lady' also does this in its evocation of familiar themes. Loss in the form of widowhood and maternal grief are all motifs which contemporary society can relate to.

Mueggler's (1999: 471) ethnography of ghosts in China suggests that ghosts arise from sudden ruptures in the temporal spirals of life and death. The ghost of the 'Drenched Lady' also speaks to

commonly held ideas about the 'correct' temporal pattern of life and death. A breach is created in community networks when a child dies before its parents. Thus, in their evocation of the familiar 'rupture' created by loss, and the importance of kinship, ghost stories such as that of the 'Drenched Lady' further create this sense of transcendental belonging and community in Edinburgh (Carsten, 2007: 13).

My friend Stephanie was born and raised in Edinburgh. Her knowledge and oral retransmission of the 'Drenched Lady' story reflects how it is more than a frightening 'return' of a 'repressed' history. Instead, ghost stories, such as this one, give voice to the 'unpacified remainder' (Schindel, 2013: 260), the 'everyday' lives left out of 'official' city histories. Furthermore, the Drenched Lady's story also generates a timeless and rooted sense of belonging to the social 'community' of the city. In telling me her version of the 'Drenched Lady', Stephanie reaffirms the importance of this social network, while opening the door for me to 'belong' to it as well.

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