

Searching for Miss Menzies • Tracing the ghosts of eighteenth-century sex workers in Edinburgh

Academic Essays

ABSTRACT

Historical records allow the lingering presences of people of the past to be traced. This study documents a search for recorded eighteenth-century sex workers in Edinburgh, assessing whether ghosts can be brought under anthropological inquiry. I find that through informing myself of the history of these women, I was able to construct a sense of their presence. Insofar as I created these ghosts, I argue that the political dispositions of the ethnographer drive attempts to locate the past in the present. I conclude by reflecting on the ethnographic significance of this attempt at conducting an ethnography of the spectral.

keywords: ghosts, sex work, Edinburgh, spectral ethnography

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Escaping a blizzard one February afternoon, I took refuge in the National Library of Scotland. Sifting through the rare collections section, I found a book entitled *Ranger's Impartial List of the Ladies of Pleasure in Edinburgh*, published in 1775 (Tytler, 1979 [1775]). The book documented the nooks of Edinburgh where an eighteenth-century man was able to find a lady. I recognised the names of these places and had visited many of them several times. Yet, I had never inhabited them in the awareness of the ghosts they housed.

In this discussion, I tell the tale of my search for the ghostly traces of Edinburgh's "ladies of pleasure" from a time gone by (Tytler, 1979 [1775]). I draw on Armstrong's method of "spectral ethnography", as a means through which "presences" of the past can be brought under anthropological inquiry (Armstrong 2010: 246). Yet, I critique his suggestion that the ethnographer should remain uninformed about the potential ghosts lurking in these spaces whilst conducting ethnography. Instead, I argue that it was in the knowledge of the

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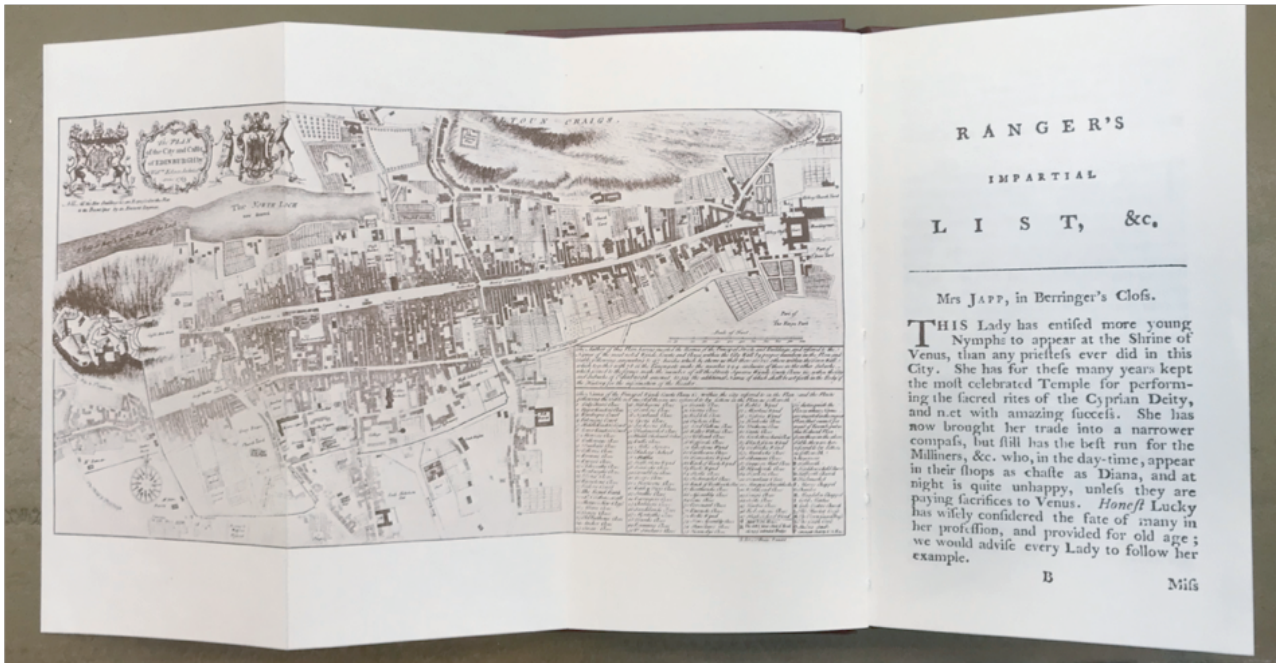


Figure 1: Ranger's Impartial List of the Ladies of Pleasure in Edinburgh (1775) (photograph by author)

history of the spaces I visited, and their former inhabitants, that I was able to make manifest the ghosts of Edinburgh's past. As such, I claim that the ghosts I experienced were a historically informed creation which was both politically charged and ethnographically significant.

I walk out of the library and turn right. 8 minutes, my map tells me, until I arrive at Bell's Wynd and meet Miss Menzies. Tall, fair hair, good skin and teeth. Bell's Wynd is one of many alleyways which stem off the Royal Mile. I have always been drawn to these alleys; at once so close to the centre of the city, yet eerily hidden from it. I enter. The noise from the city subsides. Drops of rain fall heavily from the bricks above. I look around, there is no life here, just a distant hum of it. The city, at once so familiar, begins to scare me. I imagine myself in this location, back in time existing as Miss Menzies. In this fantasy I feel her presence both within and beside me. She exists down this street, in the loud-

ness of the drop of rain, in the shudder that electrocutes my body as I see someone walk towards me. Yet, she only exists because I have brought her here, traced her and made her manifest in this alleyway, in the loudness, in the shudder.

What does it feel like to experience a ghost? Ghosts, for Bell and Edensor, are a sense of the "presence" of beings who are not materially there (Bell 1997: 813; Edensor, 2008: 325). For Freud, they are a feeling of the "unheimlich" (Freud 1919: 222). That is, an awareness of that which is "concealed, kept from sight", which is at once uneasy, yet harks back to the "old" and "familiar" (Freud 1919: 220-222). It seems there is a chasm between the ghost and the person, which is temporarily overcome in experiences of the spectral, inciting a sense of discomfort that we have felt the essence of something usually set apart from us. Though their presence suggests an ability to travel temporally, it has been

argued that ghosts are rooted in spaces (Bell 1997: 816, Carsten, 2007: 7). In their geographical establishment, ghosts (ironically) “give life” to spaces, transforming, as Bell suggests, a “space” into a “place” (Bell 1997: 815). Prior to the afternoon reflected on above, I had walked down Bell’s Wynd several times. Yet, I had never felt scared there or imagined myself both as, and in the presence of, an eighteenth-century sex worker. The meaning of this space and the feeling it invoked within me changed in my knowledge of its past inhabitants.



Figure 2: Bell’s Wynd, Edinburgh (photograph by author)

Armstrong offers the method of “spectral ethnography” as a way to study experiences with ghosts anthropologically (Armstrong 2010). Spectral ethnogra-

phy should be carried out in “abandoned” or “isolated” spaces, in which the ethnographer can open herself to a feeling of non-physical presence (Armstrong 2010: 244). Further, she should remain unbiased and uninformed about the history of the place before visiting it (Armstrong 2010: 246).

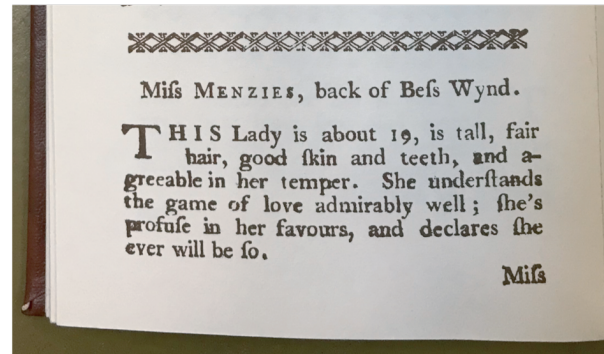


Figure 3: “Mifs Menzies” (photograph by author)

In keeping with Armstrong’s first instruction, the alley in which I traced Miss Menzies is a space of isolation, lurking silently behind the bustle of Edinburgh’s Royal Mile. His second instruction, however, is a methodological point I wish to challenge. I argue instead that, in reading the history of Miss Menzies, I was able to reconstitute an essence of the past and project it onto my experience of Bell’s Wynd in the present. The record of her past informed the way I felt in, and interacted with, the space, making manifest the ghost I expected to find.

Bell suggests that the “ghosts of place” are “always our ghosts” (Bell 1997: 821). They are both filtered through, and reflective of, the way we view the world and our expectations of it (Bell 1997: 831). A question arises here. Namely, does the constructed nature of my ghostly experience render this attempt at spectral

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ethnography self-defeating? For the remainder of this discussion, I will argue that it does not. Instead, I will claim that the process of constructing this ghost, in the knowledge of its past, can be understood as an act of resistance which is both politically and ethnographically significant.



Figure 4: Past locations of the women in Edinburgh (GoogleMaps.pho-tograph by author)

An act of Resistance

The political significance of this manifestation of the spectral becomes evident when the question is asked of why I chose to search for the traces of these women in particular. That is, sex workers from the eighteenth-century, whose presence I was only able to fathom from records left in a dusty book, housed in the rare collections section of the library. These are presences of the past that have been somewhat forgotten, or pushed to the periphery, of Edinburgh's history. I hark back here to the aforementioned chasm between the ghost and the person, which gives rise to a feeling of the "unheimlich" when crossed (Freud 1919: 222). Freud's claim is that this feeling of discomfort emerges when something that

has been "repressed" comes into our awareness (Freud 1919: 240). Departing from this idea, I suggest that the feeling of separation between certain ghosts and certain people is explainable by the fact that the ghost has been denied, or repressed, from the social experience of the person.

Processes of forgetting, Renan suggests, are crucial to the construction of the nation (Renan 1990: p. 11). For Carsten, in the creation of national identity, it is the stories of "those who live... at the margins of the state" that are "omitted" (Carsten 2007: 20, 25). I want to apply these suggestions to the constitution of the city of Edinburgh and the place of its forgotten ladies of pleasure. I suggest that these women occupy the space of 'ghost' because they have been denied, or marginalised, in the collective memory of Edinburgh's past. This denial is made evident by the improbability of my discovering the book in which these women are recorded. It is furthered by my physical experience within the peripheral spaces in which they once inhabited; spaces which suggest that these women are not simply the ghosts of Edinburgh's past, but were also the ghosts of its eighteenth-century present.

Seeking out the stories and presences of these marginalised figures is a way to bridge the gap between the ghost that has been repressed and the society that has repressed it. The ghosts we actively search for are the presences of the past which we feel are being hidden, gathering dust. Thus, the creation of ghosts will always be foregrounded by the political inclinations of the creator, in an attempt to reclaim forgotten histories. The intentionality behind my construction of the ghosts of these women is a political act because it resists the denial of them in the collective memory of Edinburgh, through bringing

them into a conscious, present awareness.

Conclusion

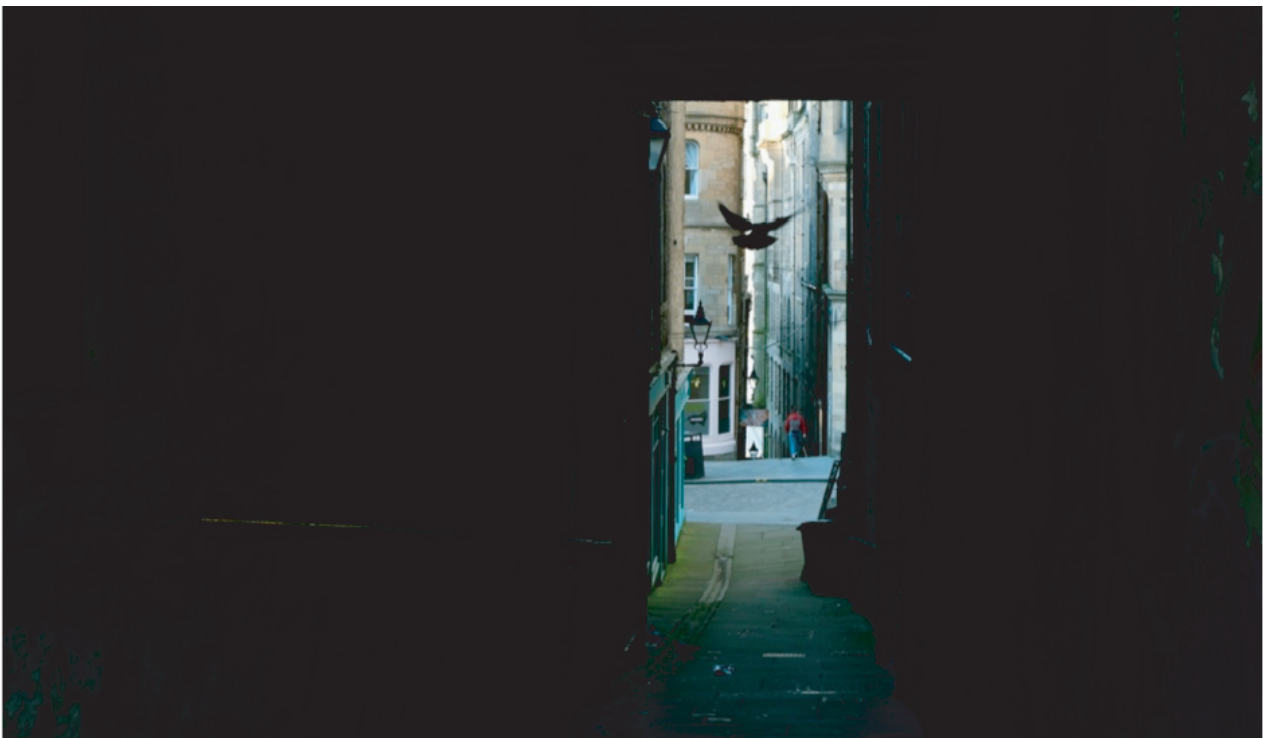
I propose that this process is ethnographically significant because it holds a mirror up to the method of anthropological fieldwork. Too often, Armstrong claims, ethnography is constructed “out of the ethnographers personal experiences, biases and viewpoints” (Armstrong 2010: 246). Encountering the presence of a feeling or essence, as opposed to a living person, the spectral ethnographer becomes acutely aware of what she is projecting onto the situation. Insofar as the ethnographer will always filter the worlds of her informants through personal, embedded ontological frameworks, this projection is implicit in the nature of the ethnographic project.

In undertaking spectral ethnography and recognising the ways in which it is constructed through the political concerns of the ethnographer, we become aware of the fact that we always construct ethnography. All ethnography is a “partial truth” (Geertz 1986 in Armstrong 2010: 246). Thus, it is in the recognition of my politically motivated construction of the ghost of Miss Menzies that I argue for the ethnographic value of spectral ethnography, as a method for confronting and resisting the biases which frame anthropological inquiry.

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Figure 5: An alleyway in Old Town Edinburgh (photograph by author)



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