

Deadly Intolerable: A Study of Modernity and Normativity of 1928 York Hex Murder

My presentation today examines the memories of the 1928 Hex Murder, also known as the York Witch Trial, that happened in York County, Pennsylvania. A local farmer was killed by three young men who were convinced that this farmer was a witch and had put the dark spell on them. To break the spell, they killed the farmer. The earliest monograph, *The Hex Murder*, was published by Forrester Hazard in 1936. However, most of the works that investigated the Hex Murder case appeared after 2000; for example, J. Ross McGinnis' *Trials of Hex* in 2000, David Kriebel's *Powwowing Among the Pennsylvania Dutch: A Traditional Medical Practice in the Modern World* in 2007, and Shane Free's 2015 documentary, *Hex Hollow: Witchcraft and Murder in Pennsylvania*. By combining an examination of these published works and the released documentary, as well as my fieldwork at York county, this paper argues that modernity is not free from mysticism inherited from local history and traditions. Thus, accepting the legitimacy of mysticism in local culture and memory is critical to ease anxieties related to mystical historical events and prevent the conflict between the transition from the widely identified tradition to modernity.

In the larger master's thesis project, I also examine newspaper archives about the Hex Murder coverage and apply Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a qualitative method to study text as a form of social practice, to study media's rhetorical strategies of framing images of this event in local memory over time. By comparing the local memory and media discourse about the Hex Murder case, I argue newspaper and other media productions play an important role in reinforcing the mysticism in local memory by becoming its own curse when promoting modernity as a monomer.

The theoretical framework in this paper lies on Derrida's hauntology, a concept that refers to the persistence of elements from the past, usually in the manner of a ghost. The concept of hauntology was originally used to describe the atemporal nature of Marxism and its tendency to "haunt western society from beyond the grave."¹ The concept is derived from Derrida's deconstructive method, "in which any attempt to locate the origin of identity or history must inevitably find itself dependent on an always-already existing set of linguistic conditions"² Despite being the central focus of *Spectres of Marx*³, there is little consistency in how other writers define the term.⁴ In this paper, I use hauntology to explain and describe personal experience narratives of the Hex Murder and their nostalgia of mysticism attached to the cultural legacy reoccurring in their storytelling and becoming a part of their latent memory.

The Hex Murder case happened at Hex Hollow, also known as Rehmeier's Hollow, in Central Pennsylvania close to the Maryland border. The victim's name was Nelson Rehmeier. He was a local pow-wow practitioner. Powwowing, as a traditional healing art in Pennsylvania Dutch signifies a vernacular system of medicine and folk magic. "Blending aspects of folk religion with healing charms, 'powwowing' includes a wide range of healing rituals used primarily for treating ailments in humans and livestock, as well as securing physical and spiritual protection, and good luck in everyday affairs"⁵ Before the appearance of modern science, powwowing was seen as a traditional science that help local community cope with personal illness and natural disasters. These folk traditions continue to the present day in both rural and urban

¹ Sean Albiez, "Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World: V. 11: Genres: Europe." *Choice* 55, no. 11 (2017): 347.

² Mark Fisher, "The metaphysics of crackle: Afrofuturism and hauntology." *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (2013): 44.

³ The term hauntology appears only three times in Derrida's book.

⁴ Fisher, "The metaphysics of crackle," 44.

⁵ Patrick J. Donmoyer and Ed Gyllenhaal, "Powwowing in Pennsylvania: An Exhibition of Ritual Material Culture," *Material Religion* 14, no. 1 (March 2018): 144.

settings and have spread across North America.⁶ However, some people have concerns with such a folk magic and others see it as misfortune. Rehmeyer was killed by three local folks whose strong belief in pow-wow as dark magic eventually convinced them to murder Rehmeyer to break the spell which they thought Rehmeyer cast on them and their families. After Rehmeyer's death, the three murderers set a fire on his house. What later reinforces local people's conviction of the haunted nature of Rehmeyer was his house somehow survived the fire and still stands well today.

Although all three murders, John Blymyer, John Curry, and Wilbert Hess, believed that Rehmeyer was responsible for their misfortunes, conducting a murder and burning down his house was not their initial intention. They learned the name of Rehmeyer from a witch named Marietta in Lancaster County. The instruction of breaking the spell was to get a lock of Rehmeyer's hair and burn his copy of *Long Lost Friend*, a book about folk-remedies. However, when they knocked out Rehmeyer's door, they decided to kill him. Since they didn't find Rehmeyer's *Long Lost Friend*, they set the fire to his body and the whole house.⁷

Another interesting fact is the occurrence of three trials following the murder. On January 6, 1929, "the first 'witchcraft' trial in 200 years on this continent opens tomorrow when two youths and a man will go on trial for the murder of a farmer whom they accused of having practiced 'black magic.'"⁸ All the trials ended within a week on January 13, 1929. All three murderers were convicted and given life sentences. During testimony, the role of witchcraft, spells and the like came out. Those elements of witchcraft made this case international news.

⁶ Don Yoder, *Hohman and Romanus: Origins and diffusion of the Pennsylvania German powwow manual*, University of California Press, 1976. 14.

⁷ J. Ross McGinnis, (Davis/Trinity Pub. Co., 2000), *Trials of Hex*. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

Free's documentary as the most recent and the only documentary about the Hex Murder case conveys a complete timeline of the story and its impact to the local community. He interviewed descendants and friends of key figures in the Hex Murder case, local pow-wow practitioners, and some scholars who did extensive research on pow-wowing and the Pennsylvania Dutch. The film includes many first-hand personal narratives of the Hex Murder case and their attitudes about pow-wowing as a traditional healing art. Free's work as a primary source restores the authenticity of Rehmeier's story by debunking some rumors and misinformation prevalent in the local community. Although Rehmeier's case happened on Thanksgiving, because of the horrific characteristics and the involvement of witchcraft, the widespread version of this story is told on Halloween.⁹

The significant effort that Free's documentary made is to showcase the interior exhibition of Rehmeier's house, the symbol of mystery. People's anxiety and fearful imagination derive from the unknown which carry the potential risks and even harmful consequences. The fact that Rehmeier's house survived the fire and still looks good today, with the refurbishment of his descendent inevitably drives people to think of this house in a mystical context. The year when the documentary was made was also the time when Rehmeier's house was open to the public as a local museum. Although Rehmeier's descendant in the documentary still believes that it is the mystical power that led to Rehmeier's death, a house tour gives the audience a clear picture of what it looks like and all the personal belongings Rehmeier used in this house.¹⁰ Through Free's documentary, Rehmeier's story as a local repertoire became more accepted by the local community. Most people used to regard it as a scandal to local history and a threat to people's safety.

⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰ *Hex Hollow: Witchcraft and Murder in Pennsylvania*, directed by Shane Free (2015, Distribber), DVD.

McGinnis' book, *Trials of Hex*, concentrates more on three trials following the Hex Murder. Over 30-year's research on this topic, J Ross becomes a local folk expert in studying the Hex Murder case. His narratives of Rehmeier's impact on local justice and people's reaction to mysticism are critical. From the perspective of justice, all three are charged with murder and given life sentence. Hess's case is different than Blymyer and Curry's. Blymyer and Curry were the first and the second case. Both were convicted the first-degree murder. However, in Hess's defense, his attorney, Harvey Gross, argued "that his client never had any intention to murder the victim. He was only a pawn in the other's more malicious intentions."¹¹

Another difference in Hess's case is that he went to Rehmeier's house not because of his personal interest but for the sake of his own family. It was his family that suffered difficulties with farming and other businesses. When Blymyer and Curry went to Hess family and convinced them that Rehmeier's spell brought all the misfortune to their family, the Hess family sent Wilbert Hess, their youngest son to save the whole family. McGinnis, therefore, argues that Hess's role as a "sacrificial lamb" determined his motive to protect his family and the justice at that time recognized it through Harvey Gross's skillful argument. "Humanity reaches its full statute at this night" said Harvey Gross when the judge decided to give Hess a second-degree murder. "Without the trials, the story becomes the straightforward recitation of a gory, violent murder. The trials add a broad dimension of absorbing personalities, local color, and community response to a unique and overwhelming event" These trails are epitomes of the community's attitude and reaction to Hex Murder though the justice system. Without directly facing the supernatural elements such as witchcraft, the focus on humanity and self-sacrifice confirms the community's underlined belief of mysticism and their resistance to deal with such a belief.

¹¹ J. Ross McGinnis (a local historian and attorney) in discussion with the author, March 15,2020.

McClure, as a local historian and former editor at the *York Daily Record* newspaper, has done a considerable investigation of the Hex Murder case and recently focus on exploring the lesson the community learned from this case. His journalistic works and public speeches position direct questions to the local community. For example, what else do we know about the Hex Murder except Halloween although all the facts pointed it was at Thanksgiving? How many people are “pow-wowing believers”? Can you explain where Rehmeier’s Hollow is?

Through McClure’s questions and public education, it is evident that he is trying to reclaim significance of the Hex Murder to its cultural heritage as an essential component to the identification of Pennsylvania Dutch. Good knowledge about pow-wowing as a healing tradition is important to avoid violent crimes to future pow-wow practitioners. Accepting pow-wowing as an essential part of their culture in the twenty-first century is also vital for local community to deal with the relationship between tradition and modernity.

Public and media exposure of the Hex Murder and the art of pow-wowing capture additional attention from within and beyond the local community and accordingly motivate ongoing research with concentration on this missing tradition. McClure’s argument throughout his journalistic practice shifts the public discourse about people’s perception about pow-wowing and encourages the local community to realize the historical meaning of this event and its cultural attachment to the local community. The associated fear, along with witchcraft, spurs people’s overreaction to the traditional remedies before the appearance of the modern science, but such a fear is not excusable when it arms modern science to attack brutally the traditions which had no harm to people.

The most recent literature added to my research is from David Kriebel’s research on Pennsylvania Dutch. His works specifically focus on the areas of southeastern and southcentral

Pennsylvania while powwowing — *Brauche* or *Braucherei*, in the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect may still be practiced among other areas of the United States and Canada where Pennsylvania Dutch people have settled. His works make a significant contribution to the field by using fieldwork-based description and textual analysis of the practice of powwowing. “It demonstrates that powwowing is not a dead relic but a living and changing practice that is still important to a number of people.”¹² By comparing the conflict between powwowing as a tradition and modern concepts of healing and medicines, Kriebel explained why powwowing persists and why many people believe it does not or should not. Furthermore, he argues powwowing is not only a healing practice and a magical religious ritual but also a custom and a symbol.¹³ He pointed out this argument at the beginning of his book:

It is especially significant and contentious in concerns for the survival of Pennsylvania Dutch identity in the twenty-first century in the face of mass culture and assimilation. In other words, what is “Dutchiness,” and how is it expressed? How does powwowing as an old “Dutch” tradition fit alongside food, craft, and language.¹⁴

Kriebel’s works shed some light on my research in exploring questions such as “why do people continue to seek powwow treatments, particularly when effective biomedical treatments are now so readily available?” and “why do people disregard powwowing in their cultural heritage and take the Hex Murder story in their local repertoire?”

My primary fieldwork includes interviews with some authors mentioned in this presentation, some random talk with folks in Southern York, and the tour to the Hex Hollow where Rehmeier was murdered at Thanksgiving in 1928. Before my journey, I came across a freshman on campus at the Central Pennsylvania. Although he was from Northern York, when he

¹² David W. Kriebel, *Powwowing among the Pennsylvania Dutch: A traditional medical practice in the modern world*. Vol. 8. Penn State Press, 2007. x.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

overheard the name of “Hex Murder,” he immediately joined our conversation. However, when asked for more details, his face showed all the questions as did mine. It seemed that he didn’t know much more other than the name itself and kept saying “weird”, “odd” and so forth. Meanwhile, he looked as if he wanted to tell me more about this story but either didn’t know how or was not sure if he should tell me the *weirdness* about this case.

Through the conversation with local historian, McClure, I learned that it is difficult to find a place to introduce powwowing as a cultural component in their local history chapter. People tend to regard powwowing as an unwanted blemish in their local memory. It is also difficult to find anything to do with the Hex Murder in local conversation except when Halloween comes. Using twisted historical facts to cover the truth exposes what makes a community feels embarrassing. The existence of powwowing and crime that happened in 1928 remains a scar that haunted the community’s memory and causes the subconscious trauma over the last century. Comparing local reactions to powwowing and the Hex Murder, many local folks are still practicing powwowing on a small scale. This traditional healing medicine is not open to the public outside of the Pennsylvania Dutch at York. Meanwhile, the legendary manual for many powwow practitioners, *Long Lost Friend*, is popular among local folks. Some younger people are self-employed as powwow practitioners at York. As many scholars expected, these younger people are proud of this “Dutchiness” in their unique identification and dedicated to inheriting this traditional legacy through their actions.

As for the family members of Rehmeier, originally, his descendants have treated this history as a family scandal and refused to talk about it in public. When McGinnis was doing his research on the Hex Murder case and three trials, he received several death threats from Rehmeier’s descendants warning him to stop his investigation. However, as time has passed, it

seems Rehmeyer's family started to change their attitude to this history. Compared to McGinnis starting his research in 1976, Free released his documentary in 2015. In this documentary, it includes the recently refurbished Hex House and some interviews from his descendants.

However, the Hex House as a museum was only opened for a short time. The museum is almost closed except for temporary opens on Halloween. When I visited the Hex House at Rehmeyer's Hollow, nobody was living there and the whole residence was equipped with surveillance. The house was entirely isolated from the neighborhood. Most people who live in that area are farmers and the roads are not easily accessible.

It seems the obscure history of powwowing and the Hex murder never officially disappear from the public attention. The resistance of people's acceptance of this part of their cultural legacy is not about distrusting their traditions but refusing to admit their deep faith. This embracement is the real curse to the preservation of their cultural traditions. Their "Dutchiness" is being modernized and the collective identity of the local community is falling apart. The lack of self-recognition of Pennsylvania Dutch is not so much an ending as a beginning from their denials of powwowing. Such a contradictory attitude to powwowing, neither accepting its values nor refusing its existence is a threat to reserving the cultural heritages while moving toward modernity.

My paper, therefore, is to demonstrate how significance it is for the local community to accept their *localness*. Temporal processing is not best for what part of the history deserves to be remembered. Instead, taking active thinking and acting to reflect on one's own cultural phenomenon is a responsible attitude to confront their own cultures. Such a realization of the complexity of one's own culture is also an effective way to avoid the chaotic transitions from tradition to modernity. In other words, modernity is not free from the mysticism inherited from

local history and traditions. Accepting the legitimacy of mysticism in local culture and memory is critical to ease anxieties from mystical historical events and, therefore, prevent the sense of embarrassment like the Hex Murder.

History, as an essential component to the constitution of local identity and community culture, plays a significant role in securing the authenticity and unity of the community. Documenting history in an accurate manner becomes an important tool in local storytelling and educating the community against the cultural assimilation movement.

To the modern audience, this paper addresses the danger of cutting up the cultural connection from the past using a selective lens to build a false cultural representation and an inaccurate localness. The inclusiveness of a locally constructed culture is helpful to reveal the dimensional cultural heritage to the local community and to their memories. On the other hand, the sense of belonging of ones' own localness reinforces their unique cultural identities in a widely recognized context. In this way, culture as a symbol of the collective human activity will not haunt people in various ways but live with people in their everyday lives. The mysticism is neither in the past nor the future but embedded in people's mind where it prays for the occurrence of miracle on one hand and accuses it as a bad omen on the another. Learning one's culture in such a selective way is what one may call a disabled culture, especially when this ideological thinking penetrates the public discourse.

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