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Otherworldly Impressions: Female Mediumship in Britain and America in the Nineteenth
and Early Twentieth Centuries

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Giulia Katherine Hoffmann

June 2014

Dissertation Committee:

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Dr. George Haggerty

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The Dissertation of Giulia Katherine Hoffmann is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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This project began more than two years before I wrote its first word, during my oral exam for my MA, when Susan Zieger suggested that given my fascination with women's studies, Gothic literature and the Victorian era, I might be interested in researching the Spiritualist movement. After a summer of reading about the Fox sisters deftly cracking their joints under tables to produce the first "spirit communications," spectral manifestations at séances and entranced mediums speaking to large crowds, I was hooked. Because of her suggestion, I've had the great fortune of writing my dissertation on a topic that continues to fascinate me. And because of her support and encouragement, always-excellent advice on topics that extended far beyond this project, and keen insights that helped motivate me even during the most difficult points of graduate school, I was able to complete something I'm immensely proud of. It's impossible to express how grateful I am for her mentorship.

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To Ben and Gabi

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Otherworldly Impressions: Female Mediumship in Britain and America in the Nineteenth
and Early Twentieth Centuries

by

Giulia Katherine Hoffmann

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, June 2014
Dr. Susan Zieger, Chairperson

This dissertation examines representations of female spirit mediumship during the rise of the Spiritualist movement in the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. In private séances as well as public trance demonstrations, spirit mediums claimed to channel the dead and convey their messages to their audiences, in addition to disseminating this information to millions of Spiritualists through their memoirs, collections of automatic writing recorded during their trances, and spirit photography. “Otherworldly Impressions” assesses the ways female spirit mediums engaged and shaped British and American cultural identities as they relayed information that became formative to the construction and reimagining of gender, racial and class ideologies.

Chapter 1, “Visions of Travel: Paranormal Arctic Exploration, the Franklin Search Expeditions, and *The Frozen Deep*” provides an analysis of mediums’ contributions to nineteenth-century scientific and imperialist discourses on Arctic exploration through their psychic visions, and assesses Charles Dickens’ and Wilkie Collins’ collaborative fictional work inspired by these events. Mediums’ reports of their

communication with spirits frequently intervened in constructions of their nations' colonial histories; "Suffering as Spectacle: Sensationalized Depictions of Racial Violence in Spirit Narratives" attends to American mediums' publications of spirit messages that capitalized on this violent history. "Spectral Labor: Women's Spirit Photography and Constructions of Material Culture" uncovers women's frequently hidden roles in the development of spirit photography; in a similar vein, "Staged Mediumship: Women's Public Performances of Spirit Communication" examines mediums' negotiation of Spiritualist constructions of their profession as well as gender ideologies to produce their public conjuring spectacles. The final chapter, "Assembly Required: Women's Automatic Writing and the Production of Print Media," looks at the way women used their automatic writing to obtain authority in the Spiritualist publishing industry as well as challenge conceptions of modern literary production.

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Introduction

Throughout the last half of the nineteenth century, in homes and Spiritualist meeting halls across America and Europe, countless individuals were inspired by the Spiritualist movement to attempt to contact the dead. One séance patron, William Gill, gave an account in 1875 of such an experience, which was published in the leading American Spiritualist periodical of the day, the *Medium and Daybreak*. In it, he recalls having watched the two mediums jointly leading the séance, Mrs. Berry and Mrs. Guppy, conjure a mysterious figure in white resembling a “column of cotton wood.” As the specter grew to its full height, Gill could see that he “wore a white turban [... which] contrasted strongly with the olive-coloured complexion of the face.” Adding to his astonishment at seeing this spirit in an English drawing-room was the revenant’s evident curiosity about his human observer, as he drew himself across the table and “brought his face within a *few inches* of mine” (Berry 185-6, emphasis Gill’s). While not all séances were so dramatic – only the best mediums, Spiritualists claimed, could impel spirits to materialize directly in front of patrons – they remained central to Spiritualist practices throughout the last half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, and served as the arena for mediums’ display of their supernatural gift.

Gill’s account highlights how these events captivated Victorians while engaging issues that were crucial to the development of Anglo-American cultural identities. Although séances were often held informally in private homes among a small group of family members and friends, many were carefully choreographed events like the séance Gill writes of. Initially in America and Britain, and eventually across the world, mediums

claimed to have the ability to communicate with those who had passed on to the spirit world, ranging from patrons' loved ones to former inhabitants of exotic locales. Gill's emphasis on the features of the apparition signals the way that Spiritualism, far from being confined to the margins of society, in fact became pivotal to the construction and circulation of cultural ideologies, including those concerning race and imperialism. And by outlining the occurrence as well as his reaction in such detail, Gill makes it clear that it was not only the promise of communicating with those they mourned that drew people to séances – it was the prospect of witnessing a spectacular show.

Narratives by séance patrons did much to publicize Spiritualism, but equally important were first-hand accounts issued by spirit mediums themselves chronicling their experiences. Forming a significant portion of the Spiritualist publishing market, hundreds of such memoirs circulated by World War I, many of which were published with great fanfare by some of the most famous mediums like Emma Hardinge Britten and Elizabeth d'Espérance. Spiritualists portrayed mediums' bodies as vessels for spirits to inhabit as they relayed their messages to audiences, and mediums' autobiographies, such as Emma Socha's early twentieth-century memoir, *My Sensational Experiences in Two Worlds*, often supported this rhetoric. In this work, she avers that she “had absolutely no knowledge of what had happened in connection with” her body during her out-of-body experiences, as she was mentally “absent” while psychically traveling to distant locations and channeling various spirit guides. Yet like her account, other mediums' narratives often undermined the Victorian gender norms underpinning Spiritualists' conviction that women were uniquely suited for mediumship as a result of their innate passivity and

nervous sensitivity. Although she initially confirms Spiritualists' contention that mediums entered a state of unconsciousness while entranced, thus ensuring their lack of interference in relaying messages to their audiences, she later depicts a moment when she disobeyed her otherworldly guides during her astral travel as she "stoutly refused" to re-inhabit her body at the close of one of the journeys. In contrast to the customary portrait of mediums as submissive, Socha's depiction highlights her intervention in her supernatural excursions, declaring that on this occasion she "evaded" her spirit guides and "fled," driving them to "use force" in their eventually successful endeavor to place her back in her own body. Her description here undercuts Spiritualist beliefs that mediums merely passively received visions and messages from their spirit guides, and indicates that mediums often considered these experiences to be empowering, as they provided them a level of spiritual insight and authority.

These accounts of spirit mediumship, like the others I consider in this dissertation, make it clear that women were crucial to Spiritualism's popularity over the next several decades. Attracting millions¹ of followers and incorporating dramatic materializations of apparitions and often poignant messages from them, Spiritualist séances united mourning with entertainment, providing comforting answers about the afterlife while captivating patrons with the mystery of the occult. Although scholars including Ann Braude and David Nartonis attribute the origin of the movement in America to the nineteenth-century

¹ As Catherine Albanese indicates, historians have long debated the exact number of Spiritualists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Ernest Isaacs, for example, estimated there were one million followers by 1855, while Spiritualists like Joel Tiffany placed the number at several million (221). Others including Britten and Frederic Marvin calculated eleven million and four million followers, respectively, although these estimates are likely overly optimistic (McGarry 3).

crisis of faith and concurrent increase in mortality due to the Civil War and Westward expansion, this explanation fails to fully account for the substantial following the movement retained until well after World War I. I contend in this dissertation that the sustained fascination with Spiritualism is largely the result of the mediums who enthralled their patrons and drew ever more followers to the movement. As the facilitators of the otherworldly communications, spirit mediums were arguably the most powerful individuals in the room, bearing spiritual wisdom they disseminated in séance circles, during public lectures, and in their published records and memoirs. That most of them were women signals how Spiritualist mediumship offered the potential for mediums to challenge nineteenth-century gender norms. This dissertation addresses how they did so while also adhering to Spiritualist doctrine which prized traditional ideals of femininity. By analyzing mediums' accounts of their experiences channeling specters as well as other records of their mediumship, I aim to broaden critical understandings of mediums' varied roles in popularizing Spiritualism and shaping nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and American cultures.

Spirit mediums, by definition, were intended to serve as intermediaries in communications between humans and spirits of the dead, rather than become the focal point of these mysterious events. This notion required mediums' disavowal of the various types of labor they performed in the séance room, the photography studio, and onstage. At the same time, their denials that they performed certain kinds of work – as well as in many cases their concealment of the help they received from their assistants – allowed them to accrue an extraordinary amount of social and professional authority. This

dissertation addresses the question of how mediums negotiated this position as they became the most powerful figures in the Spiritualist movement while their behind-the-scenes labor remained unacknowledged. By studying how they constructed their performances and professional identities throughout their careers as mediums, I hope to illuminate how they undermined gendered restrictions on women's professional work and in the process expanded their opportunities for social mobility and participation in the public sphere.

Female Mediumship in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

According to most scholarship on Spiritualism, the movement can be traced to a very specific origin: on March 31, 1848, two sisters in Hydesville, New York claimed to have communicated with poltergeists in their home, inspiring international media coverage and numerous attempts in other households to reproduce the phenomena. Kate and Margaret Fox reported that the spirits initiated contact with them through a series of raps on walls and furniture; the sisters' efforts to establish ongoing communication by relaying and interpreting the knocks and responding in kind with their questions about the afterlife arguably positions them as the first mediums of the Spiritualist movement. While these events served as the impetus behind the movement, late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century investigations into human consciousness and the paranormal were crucial to the development of Spiritualist mediumship soon after the Fox sisters' announcement of their contact with the dead. Mediumship practices drew upon scientific

theories of mesmerism,² an early form of hypnotism, as Spiritualists believed mediums entered a state of entranced semi-consciousness as a means of facilitating their communication with spirits, and on occasion, their psychical travel to distant territories or the spirit world. Frequently remarking in their memoirs that they experienced ill-health while very young, which often preceded their awareness of their preternatural gift, mediums helped establish the idea that their capacity for otherworldly communication was an inborn trait, and one that was associated with their feminine nervous sensitivity.

As public interest in Spiritualism steadily climbed and spread across the Atlantic, the methods mediums used to contact the dead became increasingly elaborate. Drawing clients to their homes or Spiritualist meeting rooms, some mediums made a name for themselves by narrating their visions or transmitting messages they claimed to have received from spirits during séances that were later disseminated by their audiences through reports in the mainstream press as well as in Spiritualist periodicals. In the 1850s and 1860s, mediums reached larger audiences by speaking to them while entranced onstage, reciting long speeches allegedly by the spirits of eminent statesmen and other public figures or performing similarly mystifying feats. During these decades mediums competed against one another for patrons by incorporating “direct voice” or “trumpet” mediumship into their performances, wherein spirits seemed to speak directly through the medium to séance patrons. By the 1870s, however, it was no longer sufficient to merely relay spirits’ missives: a younger generation of mediums began producing what they claimed were spirits in material form. Coupled with the practice of automated writing,

² See Winter for a detailed history of mesmerism.

where mediums scribbled – and by the late nineteenth century, typed – messages while purportedly under the physical control of spirit guides, as well as the invention of spirit photography in 1862, spirit mediumship generated an enormous variety of materials demonstrating its far-reaching impact not only on religious beliefs and conceptions of the afterlife, but also on developments in popular entertainment and media and communications technologies.

Although historians note that Spiritualist membership declined between the late 1870s and the beginning of World War I, mediums continued to attract attention throughout the period. Spiritualist as well as mainstream newspapers and journals frequently profiled mediums who had recently staged an exceptionally eventful séance or were touring the region, while some mediums such as the spirit photographers William Mumler and Ada Emma Deane made headlines as a result of accusations of their fraudulence. Although professional mediums – those who accepted fees for their performances – often garnered the most media coverage, private mediums who performed for local Spiritualist groups and friends also attracted their fair share of attention and, occasionally, notoriety. Social class played a significant role in mediums' designation as private or public, as those who earned fees were more likely to be deemed mercenary and predisposed to committing fraud. However, the fact that mediums represented varying class backgrounds signaled the potential for women's involvement in Spiritualism to serve as a means of gaining access to opportunities otherwise largely closed off to them, including stage careers as illusionists and vocations in the publishing industry.

As the Spiritualist movement can be traced to a quite precise beginning, my analysis of the development of women's spirit mediumship tallies with earlier studies in taking 1848 as its starting point. However, while these studies often conclude with either the close of the nineteenth century or the end of World War I, the historical scope of this dissertation extends into the mid-twentieth century, so as to give a fuller rendering of the careers of the mediums I profile and the Spiritualist movement as a whole. Over this one-hundred-year span, practices and definitions of spirit mediumship changed drastically as the conjuring routines shifted from communicating by knocking on walls and household furniture to staging large-scale events in front of vast crowds, and the means of exchanging messages expanded to include mediums narrating their clairvoyant visions, producing spirit photographs and channeling missives from their spectral guides through automatic writing. From the start of the movement, mediums drew the attention of the nation's media and much of the scientific community as psychical researchers investigated the validity of the mediums' and their patrons' claims. News from the Spiritualist movement was quickly picked up by the British press, which issued reports on the phenomena that had been witnessed in America. Yet crucial to the history of Spiritualism in Britain was a visit by the American medium, Mrs. Hayden, who made the journey in 1852 with her husband and her agent on a "professional tour" and announced quickly after her arrival that she had made contact with the dead (Britten 128). Defying societal restrictions on middle-class women having professional careers, let alone traveling abroad with an agent, she successfully publicized her supernatural gift and was largely responsible for inspiring Britain's fascination with Spiritualism.

This dissertation explores the ways female mediums like Hayden contributed to the history of Spiritualism and in the process shaped popular culture and constructions of subjectivity. Through their séance performances as well as circulating a range of written records they produced while entranced or memoirs recounting their experiences, mediums played a crucial role in propagating Spiritualism. Assessing a diverse selection of these materials, including spirit photographs, automatic writing composed on the Ouija board and mediums' narratives of clairvoyant travel, I examine these women's engagement with ideologies of gender, class and race in their work. By attending not only to some of the most prominent mediums but also to lesser-known figures in the Spiritualist movement, I aim to assess mediums' myriad roles in the movement as well as their impact on the formation of modern culture. Spiritualism, as scholars including Bridget Bennett have shown, was a transatlantic phenomenon, and I provide an analysis of mediumship that focuses on both Britain and America while also considering the development of Spiritualist practices that were specific to each country.

Reports on pseudoscientific investigations into séance phenomena, biographies and autobiographies of mediums' lives and psychic experiences, narratives of séance phenomena written by eyewitnesses and printed in periodicals, and messages purportedly given by the spirits themselves – not to mention materials produced through mediumship such as spirit photographs – form much of the archival record on Spiritualism and even now are only starting to be studied in depth. My research relies heavily on such archives so as to show the complexity of practices of mediumship, as well as to provide a more comprehensive analysis of women's contributions to the Spiritualist movement and

popular culture. Although I consider the work of mediums such as Mrs. Guppy and Cora Scott who were well-known in their day and have since become the focus of several scholarly works on Spiritualism, much of this dissertation concentrates on mediums who have largely been neglected in recent scholarship. Many of these mediums enjoyed fame in their day but have since been forgotten, while others I study remained unknown for their work outside small circles within the local Spiritualist community and their close friends and family. I highlight their work to demonstrate not only the diverse ways in which women played a central role in the Spiritualist movement as mediums, but also how they engaged and shaped British and American culture alongside the more prominent mediums.

Mediums' influence extended far beyond the Spiritualist community as they shaped constructions of national identity as well as developments in visual and print media while challenging gendered and classed restrictions on their work. Yet their and the Spiritualist community's insistence on their lack of conscious participation in the conjuring performances, while necessary to attest to the authenticity of the supernatural phenomena and hence the medium's skill, obscured their role in producing the spectacles. Part of my task has been to reconstruct this hidden production without merely discounting these women's description of their work and in the process denigrating the beliefs of millions of people; I aim to avoid either providing an uncritical account of mediums unconsciously transmitting spirits' messages or portraying their performances as the work of frauds or the deluded. This dissertation examines their conjuring acts in

depth to uncover the multiple and sometimes contradictory forms mediums' participation in the construction of modern culture took.

Gender Ideology and Constructions of Spiritualist Mediumship

Spiritualism has in recent years become a topic of critical interest, and since Alex Owen's groundbreaking study of female mediumship, *The Darkened Room*, much of this scholarship has attended to the relationship between Victorian gender norms and conceptions of female channeling. Owen's work uncovered the key role women played in the Spiritualist movement as mediums, public trance speakers and healers, and her argument that women attained this position of authority within the movement as a result of Spiritualists' conviction that they possessed the traits of sensitivity and passivity necessary for mediumship has largely structured subsequent critical assessments of female mediumship. Following this line of inquiry, Anne Braude's *Radical Spirits* gives an assessment of American Spiritualists' advocacy of suffragism, as she argues that mediums obtained leadership positions in Spiritualism and the women's rights movement through their mediumistic skill but did so by embodying idealized feminine attributes.

In a similar vein, analyses of scientific investigations into occult phenomena portray mediums as unconsciously transmitting spirit communications. Tom Gunning, for example, likens the medium to a camera as she acted as a "spiritual negativity bodying forth a positive image" through her channeling of the spirits appearing in the pictures (58). Jeffrey Sconce echoes this characterization of women as technical instruments, contending that researchers viewed them as "electromagnetic devices," a role for which

women were well-suited as a result of their nervous sensitivity and receptivity (27). Offering a corrective to this narrative of women's passivity structuring most histories of Spiritualism and mediumship, Jill Galvan argues in *The Sympathetic Medium* that female mediumship was conceived of in more complex and sometimes contradictory terms; mediums' abilities hinged upon a range of attributes which included automatism but also a sympathetic presence that enabled the transmission of otherworldly messages (16-17). My dissertation builds on this interpretation, as I assess the ways mediums molded their work to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ideals, but also highlight their disruption of gender norms as well as their intervention in the construction of ideologies about race and class.

The effects of mediums' performances and the materials they generated and disseminated extended well beyond the Spiritualist community: as I demonstrate, mediums intervened in cultural ideologies related to imperialism and scientific knowledge, class, and gender. I study the material effects of their mediumship and their negotiation of Spiritualist doctrine to show how their performances shaped modern culture. Although spirit mediums have typically been marginalized in critical analyses of popular culture, my dissertation reveals their impact on conceptions of travel and imperialist exploration, race and national identity, stage performance and women's public speech, visual culture and technology, and authorship and literature. As their careers depended on their denial of their conscious participation in these performances, their memoirs as well as other Spiritualists' accounts rarely acknowledge – and often deliberately obscure – their labor in staging the spectral communications. I therefore

analyze a variety of materials produced during their performances as well as retrospective accounts of them to assess mediums' acknowledged and hidden roles in the events.

Overview

Literary critics and early historians of the Spiritualist movement have often dismissed accounts of clairvoyance or spirit mediumship as fabrications or evidence of delusions; I seek to amend this viewpoint by detailing the contributions made by mediums who undermined the gendered division of labor and societal restrictions on women's participation in the public sphere. It became clear during my research that these women displayed considerable entrepreneurial skills as they modified their mediumship to attract ever larger audiences and readers to the Spiritualist movement. Whether devout in their beliefs or merely opportunists, mediums produced intriguing records of their communication that in many cases circulated not only in the Spiritualist press but also in the mainstream media. As I show, their work continues to shape the way we conceive of death and the supernatural as well as twentieth- and twenty-first century New Age spirituality.

My first chapter, "Visions of Travel: Paranormal Arctic Exploration, the Franklin Search Expeditions and *The Frozen Deep*," gives a historical and literary analysis of mediums' engagement with nineteenth-century imperialist and scientific discourses on Arctic exploration. Shortly after the disappearance of a British expedition led by the celebrated explorer Sir John Franklin, numerous women claimed to have experienced mystical travel in the Arctic, through which they obtained clairvoyant insight into the

state of Franklin's voyage. Although women were prohibited at the time from physically traveling to the polar regions, these clairvoyants constructed the Arctic as conceptually available to them regardless of their gender or class status. In doing so, they complicated popular and scientific understandings of extra-territorial exploration as an exclusively British, masculine domain while revising conventional models of travel narratives.

Examining the impact of these oral and written testimonies on three major publications of Charles Dickens's and Wilkie Collins's collaborative work inspired by the event, *The Frozen Deep*, I argue that these fictional and non-fictional representations of psychic travel transformed imperialist ideologies while also destabilizing the boundary between empirical science and paranormality. Drawing from letters by Franklin's niece, Sophia Cracroft, as well as popular newspapers detailing clairvoyants' involvement in these missions, I track the ways these paranormal explorers alternately challenged and contributed to the growing body of knowledge collected by authorized expeditions.

In Chapter 2, I study publications, particularly those by two famous American mediums, Fanny Conant and Cora Scott, of what they claimed were messages from African-American and Native American spirits. Although mediums on both sides of the Atlantic regularly conjured spirits of men and women of color, this chapter attends to the ways American mediums engaged their nation's history of colonization and slavery through their publication of what they portrayed as spirits' autobiographical narratives. Employing conventions of gothic, sentimental and sensation fiction, these tales were designed to engage and even entertain readers by situating the spirit narrators as protagonists in what amounted to horror stories recounting their victimization and often

violent deaths. Although mediums' circulation of these messages helped publicize abolitionist causes and protests against the American military's genocide of Native Americans, this came at the expense of objectifying and exoticizing non-white populations. Their gripping plotlines and violence enabled their use as a marketing tool for the Spiritualist movement as well as for the mediums who gained acclaim for these works, and I argue that they illustrate the mediums' exploitation of America's history of colonization and slavery to produce material that would captivate their Spiritualist readership. In this chapter, I consider the ways that nineteenth-century gender norms shaped how violence was presented in the narratives, with male mediums publishing more explicit depictions of physical violence. However, while female mediums' publications portrayed the victimization more obliquely, they nevertheless capitalized on the presentation of the tales as spectacles for white middle-class Spiritualists' consumption.

My third chapter assesses women mediums' crucial but often overlooked contributions to the history of spirit photography. Engaging the fascination with emerging visual technologies and Spiritualism in mid-nineteenth century Britain and America, spirit photography provided what devotees considered tangible evidence of the supernatural and a visual connection to patrons' lost loved ones. Women mediums performed a variety of tasks in producing and circulating the photographs and in the process shaped the fields of technology, visual culture, and paranormal research. However, while Spiritualists privileged women as mediums who conjured the spirits appearing on film, women's technical and physical labor within the photography studio

largely went unnoticed; even today, many scholars continue to focus on the work of male spirit photographers without acknowledging the varying forms of labor women performed alongside them or while working in the studio independently. This chapter illuminates the significance of women's involvement in the development of spirit photography by studying the affective, aesthetic and technical labor performed by three female mediums. Careful to attribute their work to the spirits so as to affirm the authenticity of the photography, the nature of their profession dictated that they also conceal their participation in manufacturing the images. As this chapter demonstrates, each of these mediums complicated gendered constructions of labor, acknowledging their affective labor in channeling the spirits yet also disseminating images that revealed their proficiency in photography. In doing so, they critically intervened in historical constructions of popular visual culture and media technologies.

Mediums' performances in séance rooms and on the stage were similarly critical to visual culture as well as to the history of stage magic. Chapter 4 focuses on the work of one of the most famous séance mediums, Mrs. Guppy, in addition to the public performances by the renowned conjurer Anna Eva Fay and celebrated trance speaker Estelle Roberts. Each of these mediums performed spectacular conjuring acts, summoning spirits who seemed to materialize in front of audiences or transport objects in addition to relaying messages through the medium. Although private séance gatherings are more commonly associated with spirit mediumship, mediums' public performances, including those given in large lecture halls, became crucial to the dissemination of Spiritualist beliefs and continue to shape modern-day mediumship. This chapter

illuminates how Guppy, Fay and Roberts contributed to the development of Spiritualist conjuring practices as well as popular magic shows, and strengthened the connection between Spiritualism and popular entertainment culture. These women carefully negotiated Spiritualist constructions of mediumship as well as gendered notions about stage performance in their choreographed spectacles, effectively becoming the star attractions of their shows yet emphasizing their embodiment as they described their roles in facilitating spirit communication. Through their careful fashioning of their careers and personas, each undermined constraints on their work: Guppy presented herself as a private medium yet attained public celebrity; Fay refused to attribute her shows to either occult influences or her own prestidigitation, thereby operating as both a medium and magician despite long-held biases against women becoming professional magicians; and Roberts' shows came to emphasize her conscious engagement with her audience yet portrayed her as a broadcast technology as she relayed her spirit guides' messages to large numbers of people. Providing what they advertised as evidence of the supernatural in their shows, they increased the popular appeal of Spiritualist mediumship for nineteenth- and twentieth-century audiences. Their mediumship crucially shaped the profession, expanding not only the ways that mediums provided visual and material evidence of the afterlife, but also the possibilities for women's public performances.

My fifth chapter attends to the popular use of automatic writing in séances and mediums' subsequent publication of these messages as advice manuals and novels. By the end of the nineteenth century, mediums had begun channeling spirit messages through the practice of automatic writing, transcribing them by hand as well as through

the typewriter or – less frequently – the Ouija board. Disclaiming their role as authors of the texts, mediums instead portrayed their writing as collaborations with their spirit controls. Yet their involvement in the publication of this writing served as a source of authority for them both in the séance room and in the Spiritualist publishing industry as they took on the roles of editor and publicist in addition to transcriptionist of the works. Problematizing Romantic notions of writing and authorship through their characterization of the work as collaborative, these mediums undermined the boundary between unconscious and expressive writing and revised conventional definitions of literature. I consider the work of several automatic writing mediums through a media studies lens to show how they refashioned literary production as a technologized process as they assembled texts incorporating a mixture of genres and media. Through an examination of an array of materials several women produced, including a short children’s story, a novel composed on the Ouija board and purportedly dictated by the spirit of Mark Twain, and a lengthy record of a medium’s correspondence with her spirit guides whom she identified as sixteenth-century royalty, this chapter illuminates their work in compiling and publicly disseminating the texts. In collecting their automatic writing and preparing it for publication, these mediums challenged historical limitations on women’s professional involvement in the publishing industry while also generating alternate forms of modern print media.

Tracing the history of Spiritualist mediumship while critically analyzing the various records and other materials mediums produced, this dissertation assesses mediums’ contributions to nineteenth- and twentieth-century visual, literary and material

cultures. I aim to show that while they worked to perpetuate Spiritualist depictions of their role as unconsciously relaying communications between the living and the dead, mediums in fact used their conjuring performances to significantly shape and even challenge ideologies structuring modern-day Anglo-American identities. As millions across the globe claim New Age and other modern Spiritualist faiths, an awareness of their genealogy is critical to understanding their popular appeal and the way nineteenth-century practices of mediumship continue to inform beliefs in the supernatural and the afterlife. By studying the complexity of women's engagement with Spiritualism and the effects of their performances, I hope to show that in spite of the ephemeral nature of their work, female mediums transformed American and English cultures in real and enduring ways.

Chapter 1
Visions of Travel: Paranormal Arctic Exploration,
the Franklin Search Expeditions and *The Frozen Deep*

I accompanied my Aunt & Mr Majendie to the home of Mr Hands in the street Grosvener Square by appointment at 8 o'clock in the evening to see and consult the clairvoyante Ellen Dawson... a very diminutive young girl.... I found her talking, and she got up when I went in, & asked me to sit by her on the sofa which I did. I said[,] "where have you been this evening?" "A long way[,] " she replied[,] "on the sea and into the ice." I said[,] "that is where I want to go, and we will travel together."

--*Sophia Cracroft, unpublished letter to mother and sisters, 28 May 1849*

Amid nineteenth-century commissioned accounts of Arctic exploration written by voyagers attempting to chart a passage through its inhospitable frontier, numerous alternative visions of this terrain appeared. The diverse assortment of polar travel narratives, many of which were published as collected journals and featured in national periodicals, played a substantial role in the formation of Britons' conceptions about the Arctic. Among the most remarkable, however, are accounts such as Ellen Dawson's, recounted in Sophia Cracroft's letters, of psychic travel through the frozen seas. These visions coalesced around the disappearance of the expedition commanded by Sir John Franklin three years after setting sail in 1845, a mystery that garnered national attention and inspired multiple search missions. Emerging in the context of the British obsession with the exploration and mapping of one of the last unknown frontiers, clairvoyants' statements circulated widely in such letters, as well as in popular literature and visual media during this era. Descriptions of clairvoyant travel problematized unquestioned reliance upon the information obtained by male voyagers, gradually transforming the

ideological terrain of the Arctic into an imagined space where scientific and supernatural knowledge might coexist.

Wilkie Collins's and Charles Dickens's collaborative work *The Frozen Deep*, a melodrama inspired by the Franklin disaster, represents the divergent public responses to clairvoyants' intervention in imperialist discourses and their destabilization of the boundary between empirical science and paranormality. Featuring a clairvoyant who prophesizes a shipwreck in the Arctic seas, the plot revolves around her visions of the deadly consequences of a rivalry between two of the seamen for the love of an Englishwoman awaiting the voyage's return. Indicative of the multifarious fictional and non-fictional representations of female clairvoyants, *The Frozen Deep*'s complex history of multiple revisions encompasses varying genres, including the jointly-authored 1857 dramatic production, the performance of Collins's revised script in 1866 and his publication of it in the form of a novella in 1874 based on a public reading he gave in America.³ These repeatedly altered texts attracted considerable popular attention, each edition renewing the public's interest in the search for Franklin. Together, they exemplify the development of the cultural responses during this time to Spiritualists' provocative claims about clairvoyance and other supernatural phenomena. While the text's earlier versions locate the extraordinary psychic knowledge within a marginalized Scottish nursemaid, later revisions transfer it to the middle-class Englishwoman who embodies the play's dramatic force. Achieving major exposure during its performances and publications, *The Frozen Deep*'s shifting portraits of the female psychic thus illustrate the

³ Brannan's introduction to the work provides an in-depth history of its multiple versions and performances.

increasingly central role women's clairvoyant narratives played in shaping imperialist and scientific discourses in nineteenth-century Britain.

While historians and critics including Ralph Lloyd-Jones and W. Gillies Ross have drawn attention to such narratives, there has been little consideration of their role in ideological constructions of exploration in scientific literature, the popular press and works of fiction. Tantalizingly available to claims of possession and particularly desirable for its potential use as a conduit for increased European trade with Asia, the Arctic appeared as a seemingly blank expanse within which naval explorers could establish Britain's claims to imperial possession.⁴ Fictional representations as well as non-fictional claims of paranormal travel to the North Pole, an area where women were forbidden, critically intervened in the extensive body of literature concerning polar exploration as well as emerging visual technologies that crucially shaped popular conceptions of the Arctic. Circulating during a time when there was immense popular support for Spiritualist beliefs, thus diminishing the potential for these claims to be easily dismissed, this material engages but also transforms the model of travel writing articulated by Mary Louise Pratt. These records of psychic travel echoed discourses of conventional travel, while also expanding them to include multifaceted accounts from unlikely participants.

In offering observations gleaned from their unorthodox travel, clairvoyants paradoxically reproduced common imperialist practices of surveying and circulating privileged information about a new territory and its native inhabitants, while at the same time challenging empirical methodologies of attaining this knowledge. Representing a

⁴ For an extensive analysis of the ways in which the Arctic operated as an apparent void upon which Britons projected imperialist visions, see Hill.

diverse array of women of varying ages, national identities and class status, these mediums undermined constructions of the Arctic as a British domain that could only be accessed by elite male explorers. Throughout an era in which Victorians became increasingly anxious about the project of empire, women's visions of paranormal exploration indicated a powerful and potentially threatening engagement with imperialism as they were gradually incorporated into public discourses on British national identity. *The Frozen Deep*'s manifold incarnations signal a conflicted response to clairvoyants' narratives, one that is emblematic of the shifting and heterogeneous cultural response to these women's involvement in British imperial knowledge production.

“I See the Vessel Sir John Franklin Is In”: Clairvoyant Travel Narratives

The disappearance of the *Erebus* and *Terror* after embarking on what became Franklin's third and final voyage to the Arctic sparked intense interest in discovering the crew's fate. Lauded as one of the nation's greatest explorers for his contributions to British cartography and navigation, Franklin had earned renown for leading expeditions in 1819 and 1825 to discover the Northwest Passage. The series of attempts by Franklin and numerous others in the early to mid-nineteenth century to explore this region helped forge an ideological construction of the Arctic as a space potentially open to British imperial possession. Exemplifying Bruno Latour's theorization that such domination arises from the establishment of paths through which to efficiently and repeatedly transport artifacts to the imperial center, these expeditions disseminated a steady flow of

information from the Arctic into Britain through a diverse spectrum of works which constructed complex and multifaceted representations of this territory (224). Although the Admiralty had established guidelines for explorers' commissioned travel narratives encouraging the objective reporting of empirical observations, scholars including Erika Behrisch have established that the array of literature emerging from these travels was much more expansive and included a range of poetic and philosophical works; many consisted of explorers' private reflections upon their experiences of polar travel.⁵ And as Adriana Craciun explains, nineteenth-century theories about the Arctic were varied and often contradictory: fantasies of the icy region containing abundant resources intermingled with fears that the harsh landscape would thwart any attempts of European colonization (695). Amid such uncertainty, explorers including Franklin embarked on repeated voyages in the attempt to establish a highly desirable passage through a terrain which posed perhaps more significant challenges than other colonial territories, yet offered the potential for even greater rewards.

The unusual involvement by Franklin's wife, Jane, in organizing search missions for her husband further complicated conventional models of imperial exploration.⁶ While prohibited from physically traveling to this region as she had to other faraway territories such as Tasmania, Lady Jane funded several expeditions to the Arctic in the hopes that

⁵ Behrisch discusses several works of poetry written by nineteenth-century explorers, including those by Sherard Osborn and George McDougall, both of whom were sent on search missions for Franklin in 1850 and 1852 (78). See Craciun and Spufford for further analysis of imaginative literature emerging from Arctic exploratory missions.

⁶ See Penny Russell's "Wife Stories: Narrating Marriage and Self in the Life of Jane Franklin" and "'Citizens of the World?': Jane Franklin's Transnational Fantasies" for compelling assessments of Lady Jane's careful negotiation of her public image as wife to Sir John Franklin and her own interests in international travel and political affairs.

her husband's ships would be located. In her direct contributions to these plans, Lady Jane effectively challenged the idea of travel abroad, and particularly exploration of the Arctic, as an exclusively masculine domain. However, such involvement also irritated those in the upper echelons of the Admiralty, placing her in a precarious position as she built a carefully-constructed public image as a suffering wife who was at the mercy of male officials in charge of the government-funded searches. During this time, several spirit mediums contacted Lady Jane and her niece, Sophia Cracroft, and described their visions of Franklin's ships, and the two privately consulted with a few of these clairvoyants for more specific guidance about the voyagers' whereabouts. At the same time as Lady Jane's participation in planning the official expeditions was unsettling gendered conceptions of imperial travel, these consultations also disrupted established boundaries between scientific and pseudoscientific investigations.

As the Admiralty dispatched one search mission after another, sensational reports of potential sightings appeared in the national and local periodical press, with dozens of women participating at a distance by circulating their narratives of their own psychical expeditions in search of the *Erebus* and *Terror*. Similar feats of extrasensory perception had also been reported decades earlier, with one clairvoyant even revealing Franklin's whereabouts during an expedition in 1831⁷. Yet the immense publicity prompted by his disappearance, along with its occurrence during the rise of Spiritualism in England and

⁷ According to an article entitled "Concerning Supernormal Perception," published in the *New York Times* in 1902, a clairvoyant reported from Scotland that on February 17, 1831, she was "entranced, [and] gave the latitude and longitude of Sir John Franklin, and also of Capt. Austin, who was 400 miles away from him. These statements were published far and wide months before they were heard from, and on their return their report showed that the statements made by the clairvoyante were both perfectly correct."

America in the mid-nineteenth century, led to renewed public interest in such testimonies. The widely-distributed narratives blurred the boundaries between the public sphere of scientific exploration and the private sphere of women's imagined journeys, offering an important distinction from women's sanctioned vicarious experiences of travel that they achieved through reading popular accounts of men's voyages. Rather than obtaining this information secondhand in what Francis Spufford and Jen Hill characterize as imagined travel, clairvoyants experienced visions that gave them direct access to an otherwise forbidden land, thereby occupying a central place in these accounts of their own psychic exploration of the Arctic. In reporting their experiences, these women reimagined the possibilities for polar exploration, presenting a model of paranormal travel that shaped the complex and shifting portrait of the Arctic constructed in popular as well as officially-sanctioned accounts.

Clairvoyants' vivid descriptions of the icy terrain coincided with the widespread fascination in Britain and America with emerging forms of visual technologies, and particularly with moving panoramas. In 1850, the surge in popularity of panoramas united with the increasing public interest in Franklin's fate, as several displays of moving panoramas depicting images of the Arctic debuted across London theaters in that year (Potter 5, 85-90). Attracting large audiences across a broad spectrum of society, panoramas as well as several other visual displays such as magic lantern shows and photographic slides became crucial to the dissemination of polar exploration throughout popular culture. Clairvoyants' mental impressions of the sublime Arctic landscape engaged this interest in visual technologies, their dramatic descriptions of their panoramic

visions constructing virtual tableaux for their audiences. At the same time, their visions expanded the possibilities for how women could view the Arctic firsthand: while exhibitions of popular artwork depicting the Arctic circulated widely throughout Britain, these images were largely based upon explorers' accounts and photographs of their travels. In directly conjuring visions, clairvoyants intervened in conceptions about polar exploration and popular visual culture, offering an alternative method of visualizing distant territories.

Such conceptual journeys featured a method of exploration that provided a means for these women to circumvent the physical impediments travel to the Arctic presented. Amid accounts of male voyagers dying of exposure and starvation as they confronted the treacherous ice, these paranormal explorers resisted such embodiment through mental travel, which they represented as a more powerful and successful way of obtaining information about the poles and indeed about the shipwrecked men themselves. Illustrating the way clairvoyants helped reappropriate the Arctic as conceptually accessible to women, Ellen Dawson reported to have clairvoyantly traveled to the Arctic, meeting with Franklin's ships along the way. The first clairvoyant Lady Jane and Sophia Cracroft consulted four years after Franklin had set sail, she spoke of having located a "ship in the ice" carrying "several gentlemen" whom she described in detail (MS 248/267/1). Her account of this paranormal expedition provided an even more radical and direct intervention in constructions of Arctic exploration than Lady Jane's organization and funding of search missions, as her psychic journey to the region was unimpeded by gendered restrictions.

Dawson's supernormal perception also supplied her with an understanding of subjects such as geography and cartography which were traditionally off-limits to women, particularly those of her social standing. Although professing to know "nothing at all" about reading a map, Dawson proceeded to describe Franklin's ship as being "nearer to the west, much nearer" in her consultation with Cracroft, and warned that although there is an entrance to the North Pole, "he [Franklin] cannot get out unless he is helped." Her psychic journey to the Arctic gave her the means of conceptualizing this territory and the ships' location within it, prompting her to advise Cracroft that the Admiralty should immediately send a search expedition, for "if they had help they would get out, they would break away the ice, & let the ships out into the water beyond, for there *is* water beyond" (MS 248-267/2). Dawson's engagement with academic disciplines in her reports of her visions of the Franklin voyage thus challenged notions about the process of gathering firsthand knowledge about distant lands as an endeavor reserved for wealthy and educated British men.

Dawson's psychic expeditions to a region which a female traveler could not even entertain the possibility of seeing firsthand are as remarkable as the way that she conducted her consultations with Lady Jane and Cracroft. Young and working-class, she embodied desirable features in a mesmeric subject, as they were thought to indicate that her mind was a "*tabula rasa*, a mental snowfield," as Spufford explains: accordingly, "she could have no opinion about Franklin's whereabouts, and therefore the steady movement of her finger on the map indicated the working of an inexplicable power"

(133).⁸ Yet from the moment her two upper-class patrons arrived, she clearly maintained control over the ceremony of the consultation. Being placed into a trance by her male mesmerist, she underwent a procedure that seemed to allow him to “transform a conscious individual into a living marionette” (Winter 2-3). However, as in many such mesmeric experiments, the clairvoyant subject here instead came to direct her captivated audience, who now wholly depended on her otherworldly insight for the knowledge they sought. Dawson chose who would be allowed to participate in her clairvoyant sitting; while she insisted that Sophia Cracroft serve as the one who would ask her questions about her visions, she also asked not to speak to Lady Jane directly, for fear of upsetting the grieving wife with bad news. With the quite formidable Lady Jane sitting in the next room instead of directing the psychic journey, Dawson explained to Cracroft that she could see that the men on the lost voyage were all right, but that she was “sure she [Lady Jane] could not bear to hear me talk as I do to you.” On a subsequent consultation several months later, during which Dawson similarly refused to meet with Lady Jane, she further disturbed class boundaries by expressing her sympathy for Lady Jane to Cracroft, lamenting, “I pity her so – poor thing...” (MS 248/267/2). Clearly at ease in directing the consultation regardless of her inferior class status, Dawson exemplified in this scene how these mesmeric subjects could undermine codes of acceptable behavior for women.

In addition to describing their mental journeys across the ocean, several clairvoyants further blurred the boundary between the domestic and public spheres by envisioning scenes of the Arctic that were projected within their own homes. The most

⁸ See Winter for additional analysis of this subject.

widely-publicized instance of such visions, which occurred in Londonderry in 1849, was perhaps even more unsettling to the British public than other accounts of clairvoyance, as the spectral image had been conjured with the help of the ghost of a young girl. Recounting the event forty years later in a sensationalized account of Sir Franklin's last voyage and the ensuing search missions, J. Henry Skewes writes that Captain William Coppin contacted Lady Jane directly about his family's experience of supernatural communication. In his letter to her, Coppin explains that his daughter, Louisa, who was known as "Weesy" by her family, had died several months earlier of typhoid fever but had since communicated with her family regularly by materializing as a blue ball of light. During one such materialization, Coppin's sister-in-law was apparently inspired by the media reports about Franklin's disappearance to ascertain whether Weesy could participate in the paranormal search missions, and prompted Weesy's sister Anne to ask her to reveal information about the men's whereabouts. Skewes reports that Weesy vanished suddenly, and according to Coppin's letter reprinted within the account, revealed a scene of the Arctic inscribed upon the interior of the home: "Almost immediately after there appeared on the floor a complete Arctic scene, showing two ships, surrounded with ice and almost covered with snow, including a channel that led to the ships. The 'revelation,' as if an actual Arctic reality, made [Anne] shiver with cold...." And in case there was any confusion among the family as to what the scene foretold, "there immediately 'appeared' on the opposite wall, in large round hand letters, about three inches in length the following: – 'Erebus and Terror. Sir John Franklin, Lancaster Sound, Prince Regent Inlet, Point Victory, Victoria Channel'" (75). Anne's vision

obtained through her sister's spectral assistance transported the Arctic scene directly to their home rather than necessitating her own psychic journey, transforming her family's private sitting room into a foreign territory far beyond the borders of the British Empire.

While Coppin's subsequent letter to Lady Jane about these events implies that his entire family witnessed this scene, he later emphasizes that only his children had ever seen Weesy appear, and it becomes clear in his and Skewes's narratives that only Anne had been privy to the Arctic tableau. Her mental impression of the icy landscape provided her with an experience of travel that was equally vivid as voyagers' journeys, evinced by her physical reaction to the freezing temperature. As a result of attaining such a comprehensive view of a territory even her middle-class father had not had the opportunity of viewing firsthand, Anne came to serve as the foundation for his unusual association with such a prominent woman as Lady Jane. Coppin explains that he relied upon Anne to sketch her vision and chart the course through which Franklin's ships were sailing so that he could write to Lady Jane with this information and request a meeting between the two. Having been away from home himself during the episode, Captain Coppin's ensuing correspondence with Lady Jane while she was helping to plan the next search mission was entirely dependent on his child's supernatural cartographic knowledge. Although, as in Ellen Dawson's case, Anne's prior ignorance about the Arctic territories is highlighted in Coppin's narrative, her presence within this domestic scene as well as her paranormal connection with her dead sister created the basis for direct insight about this territory which he was denied. Despite Coppin's profession as a shipbuilder and engineer for the Board of Trade, which surely afforded him credibility in

his report about the revelation to Lady Jane, his experience of the Arctic remained vicarious while his young daughter directly engaged with imperialist conceptions about the territory as she charted the path of Franklin's voyage.

Anne's ability to obtain a privileged view of the Arctic landscape without having to leave her home challenged conventions about foreign travel which excluded women from attaining firsthand knowledge about external territories. In addition, her detailed chart specifying the Franklin ships' location contributed to ongoing attempts to pinpoint the voyage and in the process determine whether it had successfully navigated previously undiscovered territory before it met with disaster. Skewes writes that Lady Jane in particular was so convinced by the report of these visions that she directed two men who commanded search expeditions in 1850 and 1851 to change their travel plans according to the prediction Weesy had made (90-93). Although the extent to which Coppin's ensuing meetings and correspondence with Lady Jane actually influenced the rescue missions' discoveries remains unclear, Lady Jane's frequent correspondence with Coppin regarding the revelations created a domain in which the boundaries blurred between the female domestic space and the masculine public arena. In a description emblematic of this merging of the private with the public, Skewes's book creates the image of a child's inscription of amateur maps of the Arctic – obtained through contact with a spirit, no less – mingling with the charts obtained through years of nautical research as the ships' commanders plotted their course. While the history of Arctic exploration by the British had reinforced the separation between these spheres, emphasizing men's suitability for such travel and women's responsibility to maintain the household as they waited patiently

for their loved ones, the Coppin family's interest and involvement in this affair uncovered the ways that women and children, rather than remaining insulated in their domestic abodes, were in fact intimately connected to imperial, and empirical, projects of the nation.

In a similar fashion, a variety of other women came forward with revelations they had obtained while under a mesmeric trance, with many of their mesmerists maintaining close ties to medical institutes and the British navy or military (Ross 7). Taking advantage of these associations, these women had their mesmerists facilitate their relationship with authoritative societies, thereby establishing a network of communication between disparate forms of knowledge. The attendance of Ashurst Majendie, Jane Franklin's brother-in-law and Cracroft's uncle, at the family's consultations with Ellen Dawson demonstrated such a collaborative relationship. A former Assistant Poor Law Commissioner and one of the original members of the Royal Geographical Society, Majendie also appeared to have been professionally linked to Dawson's mesmerist, Mr. Hands. Ross writes that Majendie may well have been the one who introduced Lady Jane to Hands and Dawson, and Cracroft's letter indicates his familiarity with mesmeric consultations, as he followed Hands and Dawson alone into the consulting room and was the first of the group to meet with her (Ross 3, Cracroft MS/248/267/1). Through her association with Hands, Dawson thus exploited her professional connections to circulate her visions, in the process demonstrating the interdependence between empirical disciplines and paranormal knowledge.

Although not many of the clairvoyants met with Lady Franklin as Dawson did, several participated indirectly in the quest to solve the mystery of Franklin's disappearance, and were privy to information that their lower-class status and gender otherwise precluded them from obtaining. In one instance, Emma L., a domestic servant in the employ of a mesmerist and physician in Bolton, gained access to privileged information possessed by the British government as a result of her mesmerist, Joseph Haddock, having a contact in the navy. This acquaintance, Captain Alexander Maconochie, served to mediate between the two parties, transmitting between them information obtained from the official missions led by scientists and the Admiralty, in addition to circulating descriptions of the decidedly unofficial psychic visions. As noted in an article published in *The Spirit of the Age*, Emma L. was "uninstructed, and unable to read and write," but could indicate the location of her psychic travel by pointing to it on a map ("Mesmeric Announcement" 303). While never in a position to directly correspond with the Admiralty, she was interviewed by the press about her visions, providing an estimate of when Franklin would return home and "describ[ing] the person of Sir John Franklin." Her visions also situated her alongside one of the Admiralty's official searches, as she is reported to have "visited Sir John Ross's ships, and says that they are frozen into the ice and that he can't turn his ship round." Such consultations may have influenced the search expeditions Lady Jane helped organize, and demonstrate the ways that scientific and paranormal discourses mutually informed one another.

Significantly, the Admiralty initially allowed Emma L. unprecedented access to its archive of materials related to their searches, providing her with maps of the polar

regions, letters written by Franklin and other officers on the *Erebus* and *Terror*, and other news they had attained through rescue missions (Ross 5). In an indication of the ways her intervention helped lay the groundwork for the mixture of the public and private within the government-sanctioned searches, they also sent her a lock of Franklin's hair, which Ross notes was likely given to the Admiralty by Lady Jane, providing Emma L. with an intimate relic in the hopes of inspiring her powers of clairvoyance (5). While her visions were ultimately dismissed by this council, Emma L.'s supernatural insight interrupted the Admiralty's focus on the information gathered by male explorers during the time they spent considering a "travel" narrative which otherwise would never have caught their notice.

In effect, clairvoyants like Ellen Dawson and Emma L. created an imagined terrain of polar exploration, expanding the scope of travel narratives to include their paranormal investigation of this region. In their unique visions, they provided conflicting, often unreliable, yet certainly compelling accounts obtained through a "gift" that was usually dismissed by scientists at the same time that the Victorian public was becoming increasingly interested in it. Seemingly aware of the unorthodox search committee that had begun flooding newspapers with reports about the Arctic, one clairvoyant named Jenny, a domestic servant from Scotland, noted she wasn't alone on her psychic travels to the Arctic. When asked during her trance whether she had passed other travelers along her route, she replied that she had "passed one woman going" on her own journey to the Arctic and they had conversed briefly: "she told me she was from London, and I said I was from Liverpool. She is away after him (Sir J. Franklin)" ("Clairvoyant Expedition"

4). Such a statement reveals how their paranormal journeys to the Arctic situated these women among a community of fellow travelers with various backgrounds, each of their voices contributing to a complex and continually changing body of literature about polar travel.

Although clairvoyants such as Jenny had a vested interest in contributing to the search missions from which they had for the most part been excluded, many of their visions explored the multinational nature of these fact-gathering missions, complicating the notion of the Arctic as possessed in all but name by the British. In addition to clairvoyants who hailed from opposite ends of the country, numerous seers participated from multiple sites around the world, with many based in America in particular, as well as in Nova Scotia and Australia. Their accounts attest to the great distance news of the disaster had traveled, but also indicate the extent to which conceptions about empire shaped their participation. Testimonies that circulated in the press outside of Britain came from women living in colonized territories and of European descent, each of whom participated in amassing and distributing information gleaned from naval expeditions. This news reached local papers and in the process of its publication highlighted to readers England's ongoing imperialist objectives. Sirkar Ka Nakur, an Indian reader who followed these reports, describes having "seen, about the year 1848-49, an account which appeared in various Indian newspapers of a clairvoyante, a little girl of European parentage, but who had never been out of Calcutta. She was represented as saying that Sir John was dead; but as she gave various details regarding the ship and crew, it would be interesting to compare it with Capt. McClintock's statement" ("Sir John Franklin" 269).

This comment, published in *Notes and Queries* a full decade after the vision had been reported in the press, speaks to the volume of information being circulated throughout the empire that drew attention to an English national hero and his imperialist mission. By alerting newspapers to her dramatic vision, the clairvoyant elicited concern from readers for voyagers entrusted with the mission of seeking to further extend the empire's boundaries. At the same time, Nakur's comparison between her statement and McClintock's travel narrative affirms the credibility of her prognostication while simultaneously promoting a work that had just been published and was already drawing considerable attention. Nakur's emphasis on the clairvoyant's European heritage also prevented readers of this elite British journal from associating her psychic vision with native inhabitants' religious practices, and thereby dismissing it as the product of a primitive superstition. While the clairvoyant's paranormal participation in the search mission helped decenter British knowledge through its circulation in the Indian press, it also strengthened feelings of national identity for readers in England as well as in this colonial outpost.

Several clairvoyants' revelations also demonstrated an ambivalent response to imperialist endeavors as they highlighted the various ways these voyages could have an impact on the region. In one case, an anonymous clairvoyant from Melbourne reminded her audience of the likelihood of British explorers regularly coming into contact with indigenous peoples when she imagined the Arctic as "inhabited by natives" (Elliotson 71). In a terrain interpreted as containing "white explorers and their deeds only," her observation calls attention to the presence of Inuit inhabitants, a fact that tended to be

overlooked in official constructions of the territory as untroubled by competing claims to its possession (Hill 9). Her acknowledgement of the existence of the Inuit prior to British exploration appears in stark contrast to the appropriation of their territory by Admiralty-commissioned explorers, whose transformation of the Arctic into constructed settlements based upon English landmarks affirmed their perception that the landscape constituted Britain's outermost colonial boundaries (Craciun 699).

This description also reveals how her alternative form of knowledge might build upon British conceptions about indigenous shamanistic visions reported in explorers' travel narratives. Several popular European travel accounts, such as David Cranz's *The History of Greenland*, contain descriptions of Inuit religious rites, thus widely circulating ethnographic observations about shamanist practices during an era in which research into mesmerism was also receiving a considerable amount of attention. The practice of mesmerism, particularly in the context of producing clairvoyants' visions of Arctic travel, shared many similarities with shamanist trances, which according to Cranz provided shamans with the means of psychically projecting their spirits across vast distances and auguring the future (206, 298). Anthropologists including Edward Tylor noted disdainfully that "it appears that the received spiritualistic theory of the alleged [supernatural] phenomena belongs to the philosophy of savages," thereby marginalizing these alternative contributions to understandings of the afterlife (1: 155). Yet in drawing attention to Inuit natives during her mesmeric trance, the Melbourne clairvoyant reminds her audience of the association between mesmeric visions and shamanist trances. Such an

affiliation demonstrates the disruptive potential of paranormality as a system of knowledge existing outside the boundaries of Enlightenment scientific principles.

However, by focusing her gaze on the native population she claims to observe in the act of viewing the *Erebus* and *Terror*, the Melbourne clairvoyant reinscribes the anthropological narrative asserting European technological superiority as she describes the natives' reactions. She remarks that they "are quite astonished and are running down to look" at the arrival of the ships. Although her statement suggests that these European explorers might become the object of the Inuits' gaze as they enter this territory, it does so in a way that recalls eighteenth and nineteenth-century travel writing which, as Pratt writes, "verif[ies] the European's achievement" (205). Thus, it reiterates the kinds of observations contained in the travel narratives that do mention explorers' brief interactions with native inhabitants, but tended to minimize the Inuits' contributions to British knowledge and confirm the explorers' superior technical and intellectual abilities. Captain Francis McClintock's tremendously popular recounting of his voyage in search of Franklin, for example, provides details of his crews' encounters with Inuit communities but emphasizes the natives' experiences of deprivation and starvation in their apparently unsuccessful attempts to survive in the harsh climate. While information obtained from the Inuit was key to explorers' charting of the Arctic as well as their acquisition of evidence about the outcome of the Franklin expedition, McClintock also questions the accuracy of their understanding of wildlife migration patterns and complains about their rudimentary map-making skills (44, 162). Similar to the way that these kinds of descriptions in McClintock's as well as other voyagers' narratives coalesce

to form a representation of the natives' need for European intervention, the Melbourne clairvoyant's remark contributes to an understanding of the Inuit as so technologically primitive that a moment of imperial contact inspires their amazement and even admiration. Her assertion thus indicates the limitations of clairvoyants' transformation of polar travel writing, their participation in scientific and public discourses contingent upon it not posing a threat to British imperial ideology.

In offering specific, if conflicting and ever-changing, estimates of Franklin's location and assessments of the hazardous terrain that locked in the ships, clairvoyants also replicated common sentiments in popular travel writing emphasizing the European traveler's command over the territory he surveyed. To an even greater extent than the voyagers composing canonical travel narratives, paranormal explorers such as Ellen Dawson and Emma L. achieved a "broad panorama anchored in the seer" through the vantage point they gained from their aerial travel (Pratt 209). The Australian clairvoyant reported just such a panoramic vision to the *Zoist*: "I see the vessel Sir John Franklin is in; there are other vessels with him; they are all starting together.... I see floating in the sea those large white cliffs; they are icebergs" (71). Signaling that the Arctic constituted a zone surpassing empirical methods of observation as well as the technical capabilities of displays such as moving panoramas which relied upon these methodologies, clairvoyants' seemingly unlimited gaze offered a more complete perspective than could be gained by the voyagers' much more limited views. Psychic travelers such as Emma L. described rich images of Arctic features that dazzled British explorers but also overwhelmed the narrower scope of their vision. According to William Gregory, who documented such

psychical phenomena, Emma had the opportunity on one of her journeys to view the entire stretch of the aurora borealis “as an arch, rising as if from the ground at one end, and descending to it again at the other. From this arch, colored streamers rose upwards, and some of these curved backwards” (306). Gaining a visual perspective of the scenery that even large mechanized panoramas could only partially represent, Emma conjured an image capturing the beauty of the aurora borealis at the same time that it conveyed the enormous scale of a magnetic phenomenon that appears to distort physical properties of light. Such visions thus underscore the ambivalent nature of these women’s engagement with Arctic exploration: while undermining constructions of exploration and fact-gathering as solely masculine endeavors, their reports also served to reinforce the imperialist objectives of accumulating geographical and ethnographic data.

Additionally, the clairvoyants’ multiple perspectives and national identifications also complicate Pratt’s model of imperialist travel writing. Disrupting the process of imperial formation whereby materials and knowledge from outlying territories accumulate within the metropolitan center, these women instead pulled information they obtained through their unconventional methods back to their own individual locations and dispersed it worldwide through international media publications. Moreover, their paranormal knowledge significantly departed from imperialist discourses as it created the possibility for participants to transcend the gender and class barriers preventing their physical journeys and undertake an alternate form of travel. And unlike the voyagers who physically altered the Arctic landscape as if it were a colony in all but name, psychics’ mental journeys left no trace of their presence. In circulating their visions, clairvoyants

highlighted the suitability of the Arctic as a unique space for their paranormal travel, its status as a seemingly blank canvas rendering it amenable to imperialist fantasies and clairvoyant imaginings alike. Its natural features, among them perpetual daylight during explorers' summertime voyages and the ruthless conditions which caused many starving voyagers to hallucinate, had already aligned it in the minds of generations of explorers and scientists with the supernatural. Outlandish pseudoscientific theories about the region proliferated, rendering it a quasi-mythical land where unnatural physical properties prevented the ocean from freezing at its center, or even created a vortex at the pole through which voyagers might be transported to Antarctica (Craciun 695; Wilson 193). As a space that appeared to surpass the limits of empirical explanation, the Arctic thus seemed only comprehensible through the supernormal perception claimed by psychics. Their contradictory contribution to imperialist discourses therefore reveals the larger complexities involved in categorizing clairvoyants' relationship to Victorian ideologies.

Such multifaceted narratives resist categorization within the history of Arctic exploration and visual culture, and reveal the larger complexities involved in assessing clairvoyants' engagement in nineteenth-century travel writing. These paranormal explorers ultimately constructed an alternate model of travel literature, yet their descriptions of the Arctic were nonetheless shaped by the imperialist assumptions underwriting much conventional travel writing. Further exhibiting clairvoyants' contradictory intervention in the imperial archive are fictional representations of their involvement in Arctic expeditions, and in particular, Charles Dickens's and Wilkie Collins's *The Frozen Deep*. With its complex production history, including numerous

public and private performances, the work similarly portrays women's paranormal investigations in vexed terms. Whereas the psychics involved in the search for Franklin reproduced imperialist ideologies to varying degrees, however, *The Frozen Deep* situates clairvoyance in opposition to such practices. Despite the clairvoyant's marginal status in relation to authorized forms of knowledge, however, Dickens's and Collins's text reveals the cultural impact of the Franklin clairvoyants' contributions to the field of Arctic travel narratives. While her visions threaten to undermine official constructions of the Arctic as conducive to Britain's territorial expansion, the portrayal of the clairvoyant reinforces the representation of an intricate relationship between scientific and paranormal discourses that emerged in the Franklin clairvoyants' narratives.

Characterizing the Clairvoyant

In *The Frozen Deep*, drafted first by Collins but heavily edited by Dickens, two exploratory ships to the Arctic founder, trapping the men amid the ice. The tale follows two of these men, Frank Aldersley and Richard Wardour, as they try to survive in the frigid climate while also negotiating their rivalry over the central female character, Clara Burnham, who anxiously awaits news of their fate back in England. Borrowing heavily from the Franklin voyage disaster, its sensationalized depiction of these events led to its popular and critical success in Britain. Initially performed in 1857, only three years after Dr. John Rae returned from his search mission to the Arctic and reported evidence obtained by Inuit inhabitants that many of the men on the *Erebus* and *Terror* had resorted to cannibalism before their demise, the play alludes to this "last resort" but in the end

absolves the men of the shocking accusation. Similarly appealing to audiences is its inclusion of a character who claims to be clairvoyant, and who heightens the suspense of the play with her dire predictions of the shipwrecked men's fate. Among the most significant revisions of the work lies with this character: while in the 1857 version, Dickens insisted on ascribing the supernormal powers to a Scottish nursemaid, Collins's revision nine years later eliminates the nursemaid from the story altogether, her powers of second sight now possessed by Clara. While the exclusion of a character during the revision and performance process for a drama might not in itself be unusual, such a change in these versions creates far-reaching implications for the ways they contend with issues of class, gender and national identity and their relationship to clairvoyant mediumship.

Studies of *The Frozen Deep* have in large part focused on the 1857 production, with little attention devoted to the structural and thematic variations among the revisions, particularly with regard to their treatment of clairvoyance as a central element within each of them. In their analysis of the play, scholars including Lillian Nayder, Winona Howe and John Kofron have assessed Dickens's and Collins's engagement with anxieties regarding national identity and the threatening presence of savagery; Nayder in particular has examined the ways the nurse "embodies the threat of racial and sexual difference and is tied to the cannibals referred to in Dr. Rae's report" (63). However, such an interpretation offers only a partial analysis of the complex development of this work's portrayal of the clairvoyant and its engagement with cultural debates surrounding investigations into the supernatural. While earlier incarnations of the character

marginalize her to the extent that she becomes largely irrelevant by the play's end, subsequent revisions show her to undermine conceptions about English national identity, with her visions at the same time constructing an uneasy relationship between scientific and paranormal knowledge.

Depicting Nurse Esther as morally suspect and mentally unsound, the first edition of *The Frozen Deep* associates her clairvoyance with a simplistic, archaic superstition that only savages would entertain, characterizing her and this alternative form of knowledge as the antitheses of Englishness. It was at Dickens's behest that Collins included Nurse Esther in his revised draft of the play, and Esther's Scottish background stigmatizes her in a way that mirrors the characterization of Scottish Highlanders as uncivilized in articles published in *Household Words* (Nayder 63). "The North Against the South," for example, explains that "multitudes of savage peoples have issued from the borders of the north; and, like their own boisterous torrents and icy winds, have done the work of sudden tempests and destructive billows to the nations of the south" (191). As one of those who hail from the "barbarous North," Nurse Esther distresses the women in her household with her frenzied predictions and appears to have a harmful influence over Clara in particular (192). Her national identification also aligns her with stereotypical depictions of the Inuit as savages, Nayder demonstrates; her working-class status and histrionic behavior serve to denigrate her further. It is her melodramatic and, in the end, mostly incorrect predictions of the voyagers' fate that establish her as a vehicle for undermining both the Inuit testimony in Rae's report about the Franklin voyagers resorting to cannibalism, and clairvoyance as an alternative method of gathering

knowledge. Voicing the general tenor of the play, one of the characters awaiting the men's return calls her visions "barbarous nonsense" and wishes that the "Scotch Nurse was safely back among her own people" (104). Nurse Esther's questionable character and easily dismissible predictions thus eradicate the threat she poses to an English national identity grounded in a conviction in moral and intellectual superiority.

Through her inaccurate predictions which undermine her aggressive insistence that "the Second Sight is a truth," Nurse Esther paradoxically reinforces constructions of English heroism in her implied critiques of masculine exploration (115). Rather than instigating the violence and revenge Esther predicts, the two men demonstrate that their expedition has inspired valor and self-sacrifice, with Wardour forfeiting his life to save Aldersley. The nurse's warnings to the women awaiting news of the expedition that they will depend upon her to provide them with information "when a' earthly tidings fail" fall flat, and her behavior becomes increasingly erratic as the play progresses (104).

However, while this initial publication's engagement with cultural anxieties regarding imperialist exploration criticizes Esther's alternative source of knowledge acquisition, it also suggests the disruptive potential of this method. Persisting in announcing her predictions to the other women of the household despite their objections, she problematizes the public/private divide by bringing her visions of polar travel into the feminine domicile. Although the only aspect of the visions that the drama confirms is her representation of the Arctic as a barren and dangerous landscape, this assertion helps shape an ambivalent portrait of polar travel: the frozen terrain serves as the locus for seamen's heroic deeds, yet simultaneously threatens to undermine the image of Britain's

imperial success, having already consumed scores of its intrepid explorers (Hill 15). While the subversive effect of Nurse Esther's visions is limited by her marginalized status as an uneducated Scotswoman, Collins's contributions to the production of *The Frozen Deep* explore the potential for clairvoyant knowledge to disturb core British cultural values.

Collins's later revisions after the 1857 publication, however, locate Esther's alternative knowledge within a much more central character, the English, middle-class Clara Burnham, eliminating Nurse Esther altogether. In doing so, both the 1866 play and the 1874 published text Collins used for a reading tour in America the previous year present clairvoyance as a troubling yet crucial component in the production of British knowledge. As the object of Aldersley's and Wardour's desire, Clara comes to mediate their rivalry as they embark on their expedition to the Arctic. Throughout this time, she also becomes the emotional focal point of the melodrama through her anxious predictions, where she experiences trances that allow her to psychically travel to the Arctic and perceive that the voyagers have been shipwrecked. Bridging the gap between physical polar exploration and privately imagined travel through the visions she circulates, Clara thus signifies the increasing influence alternative forms of knowledge had on shaping conceptions of imperial expeditions.

At once the embodiment of idealized English femininity and marked as an Other by her Scottish upbringing, Clara is characterized as a hybrid figure who destabilizes notions of English identity while recuperating otherworldly knowledge from the margins. These texts' alignment of paranormality with foreignness remains consistent with the

initial play's emphasis on Esther's background; her friend Lucy Crayford explains it is her time spent in the Scottish Highlands that instilled Clara's belief in second sight. Lucy's claim that "[t]he ignorant people about her... filled her mind with the superstitions which are still respected as truths in the wild north—especially the superstition called the Second Sight" echoes sentiments Tylor expressed in comparing descriptions of Scottish Highlanders' second sight to those circulated by "savage tribes" (1874: 15; 2: 31). Although Clara channels the same supernatural knowledge as Esther, however, the later versions of the text distance her from the type of identification with foreignness associated with the nurse. Her susceptibility to being influenced by Scottish beliefs is tempered by her English parentage and middle-class upbringing, and Collins and Dickens make it clear that she spends much of her life as a young adult in Kent receiving a more appropriate education and developing friendships suitable to her class status. Such a variable representation of Clara's possession of this alternative form of knowledge indicates the heterogeneous nature of the wider cultural engagement with discourses on the relationship between epistemology and class and national identity.

No longer associated with notions of lower-class savagery written into the nurse's role, Clara exemplifies the qualities of a respectable middle-class spirit medium with her delicate constitution and nervous sensitivity. While Collins's own interest in psychical research, evidenced in works such as *The Moonstone* and his essay series "Magnetic Evenings at Home," likely contributed to his sympathetic portrayal of clairvoyance, situating this psychical ability within Clara in effect normalizes it and in doing so makes an important claim for its place within nineteenth-century society. As Alex Owen

explains, middle-class mediums were associated with respectability, virtue and truthfulness; Clara's visions become legitimized in a way that Nurse Esther's never were by virtue of her privileged status (51). In fact, by the end of the 1866 play, Clara is credited with having obtained authentic visions of Wardour and Aldersley, from which she learns that the two have been sent out on a dangerous mission together. Confronting the remaining officers with her vision, she uses the prediction to demonstrate that they are misleading her when they try to reassure her of the men's safety, protesting, "The dream showed me your lost companions in the Arctic wilderness. And the tale it told of the missing men was not the tale that you and your brother-officer have told me" (38). Her challenge to their version of events unnerves one of the officers in particular, Lieutenant Crayford, whose initial skepticism about Clara's claim to possess the gift of second sight turns to awe when he realizes he will not be able to offer any knowledge about the men's journey that she has not already foreseen. As she describes her vision, one that resembles accounts by clairvoyants such as Emma L. with Clara's description of the Arctic landscape and northern lights, Lieutenant Crayford admits, "Dream or vision, it showed her the truth!" (38-9). Despite Clara ultimately being incorrect, as Nurse Esther was, in her prediction that the two men have died, Crayford confirms her insights, validating for readers her unconventional method of obtaining this information. As a result, her insights display a more powerful engagement with emerging conceptions about the relationship between paranormal and scientific investigations.

However, although this alternative knowledge is recuperated through this central figure, the later editions also exhibit variances in the portrayal of the effects of Clara's

visions, particularly with regard to the way they allow her to transcend physical boundaries. Collins's earlier revision in 1866 presents Clara's visions of the Arctic in much greater detail than his 1874 reading provides, depicting her first trance in a way that recalls the images painted on popular mechanical panoramas. The initial performance of *The Frozen Deep* in 1857 had already employed dramatic scenery to depict the desolate Arctic landscape, Russell Potter explains; yet Collins's revision was the first to use this scenery as a way of physically projecting Clara's psychic visions to her audience (139-141). As in Anne Coppin's vision, Clara's home is rendered an Arctic tableau as her first psychical observation of the men stranded on an iceberg fills the room. Taking advantage of the location of this performance within the large Olympic Theater in London, Collins indicates in his stage directions how this clairvoyant insight transforms the English stage as well as the home: the lighting "reveals the view of an iceberg floating on dark water, and seen against a dark sky" (14). In conjuring this scene of the Arctic, Clara demonstrates her mysterious insight into the men's journey at the same time that the play shapes its audience's conceptions about the territory as a dangerous wasteland. As she sinks more deeply into her trance, Clara projects an image of the Arctic for her audience that threatens to overwhelm the observer, where "long rays of red light shoot up from behind the iceberg over the dark sky, and, spreading themselves gradually, suffuse, first the sky, then the iceberg, then the two figures on it.... [T]his effect of light, from the aurora borealis, gathers and overspreads the scene" until even she appears engulfed within it (14). Exposing theater-goers to this display of Arctic grandeur destabilized not only the boundary between this external territory and the internal space of the theater, but

also bridged the divide between the clairvoyant and her audience. Through this visual spectacle, the play provided its viewers with the vicarious experience of Arctic travel that contemporaneous mechanical panoramas offered, but also gave them direct access to the vision Clara experiences. With her mental image inscribed upon the theater's scenery, the clairvoyant interprets this landscape for her audience in a more powerful way than mechanical panoramas could, her vision directing the scene to the extent that when it disappears, the stage itself is immersed in darkness.

Although Collins's subsequent publication of the version he presented on his reading tour includes various descriptions of Clara's behavior during her trances, it omits providing the level of access to her supernatural perception that audiences are given in the 1866 text. Such extensive descriptions of the psychic imagery may have been deemed more suitable for the stage, but this later version offers a deeper consideration of the ways paranormal insight serves as a means for Clara to establish connections with a distant territory despite being largely restricted to her home. In fact, her trances become a substitute for regular interaction with others in her community and threaten to replace a more normative form of socializing for a middle-class woman of her age. Rather than spending her time attracting suitors by attending dances and other events, Lucy complains, Clara "shuns all society" and "persists in remaining at home" (19). Her self-imposed seclusion conceals her mental connection to a much wider communicative network, however: Lucy explains she has overheard Clara "sp[eaking] of persons in a foreign country – perfect strangers to my sister and to me" during one of her trances (18). Such a statement indicating Clara's knowledge about foreigners who would not otherwise

figure in her life marks a departure from Collins's 1866 play, where Lucy's description of Clara's trances only details Clara's incoherent speech and subsequent fainting. Although the narrator suggests in an aside in the 1874 reading that Clara's visions disturb domesticity by occurring "in the garden of her English home," there is a greater emphasis on Clara psychically travelling outside the confines of her home (145). Leading Lucy to ask herself whether "Clara [is] present, in the spirit, with our loved and lost ones in the lonely North," Clara's visions provide her a way to exceed the limitations imposed on women's travel and to establish a communicative network more edifying than the relations she maintains at home (148). Collins's published reading of *The Frozen Deep* thus builds upon his earlier version's representation of clairvoyance as a method of gathering knowledge about a foreign territory and directly disseminating it to an English audience, laying greater emphasis on its potential for allowing the privileged medium to obtain such knowledge far beyond domestic boundaries.

In addition to the shift in the portrayal of the ways that Clara's paranormal knowledge allows her to shape understandings of Arctic travel, these later versions also demonstrate ambivalence in their presentation of the relationship between her clairvoyant abilities and scientific authority. Clara's visions are attended by illness and fainting spells, described by her doctor as symptoms of one of the "disordered conditions of the brain and the nervous system" in the 1866 play; she is diagnosed with greater certainty as having a "hysterical malady" in the published reading (1866: 8; 1874: 20). This association with nervous illness is a common feature of descriptions of female mediums, as such sensitivity was perceived to facilitate these women's otherworldly

communications.⁹ By portraying Clara as suffering from a nervous disorder, Collins aligns her with Spiritualist writing describing women as particularly suited for extra-normal perception, but also draws upon a long history of medical science associating the female body with emotional lability to the point of physical incapacity. Lucy likens the development of Clara's belief in the second sight to her "catch[ing] the infection of the superstition about her," thereby signifying a correlation between female clairvoyance and a contagious disease (16). Her "infection" appears to take a physical toll, the narrative emphasizes, rendering her "weird and ghostlike" even when she is not experiencing one of her trances (141). By coupling Clara's clairvoyance with physical and psychological illness to the extent that her weakened frame resembles the ghostly figures she envisions, the narrative calls attention to the potentially deleterious effect that belief in extrasensory perception threatens, and questions Clara's ability to control her supernatural powers. In doing so, it downplays the impact her previous statements about the Arctic expedition might have on cultural constructions of extra-territorial exploration.

Yet the effects of Clara's illness are such that while she is rendered the object of medical surveillance as her physician – and the play's audience – attempt to diagnose her, she also presents a challenge to medical science. Collins's draft of the play makes clear that Clara's symptoms and descriptions of her visions confound the physician's empirical reasoning. Discussing her visions with Lucy, he admits that "[n]either my science, nor any man's science can clear up the mystery of what you have told me" (8). Collins's published reading goes further to imply that not only do Clara's symptoms defy medical

⁹ For a detailed history of physicians' and Spiritualists' conceptions about mediums' nervous sensitivity, see Sconce 50-56, Owen 139-201, Galvan, and Winter.

classification, but her own conscious resistance to her doctor's examination prevents him from attaining mastery of the situation. Clara's objection to her physician's examination of her is apparent: in her consultation with him, she "submitted impatiently to the close investigation of which he made her the object. He questioned her, and she answered invariably.... [H]e adverted to the news of the Expedition [but] Clara declined to discuss the question. She rose with formal politeness, and requested permission to return to the house. The doctor attempted no further resistance" (163). Her lack of cooperation greatly alarms the physician, and he ascribes her behavior to her "distempered fancies and visions" (167). Reading her resistance as he attempts to read her body for signs of an illness that must be remedied, he tells her companion that he observes "[p]hysically and morally a change for the worse in Clara"; it is evident that both changes are equally disconcerting (165). Clara's clairvoyance is thus depicted as providing her with knowledge surpassing that of empirical science, the effects of which threaten her physician's ability to normalize her through his medical treatment.

While Clara is similarly characterized in the 1857 production as "excitable and nervous" and subsequently vulnerable to the influence of Nurse Esther, her behavior is not medicalized in the way Collins's later editions render it; a doctor's opinion of her health is not even introduced until the 1866 text (104). Medical expertise makes its most sustained appearance in Collins's last published edition of *The Frozen Deep*, which includes a role for the doctor for the first time in the work, thereby providing the medical profession a direct voice to the audience. In doing so, the text draws a connection between empirical science and popular beliefs in Spiritualism, asserting the necessity for

authoritative science to evaluate claims – particularly by women – to the possession of alternative understandings of the natural world and human perception. Complicating this privileging of medical science, however, is the description of the physician’s own treatment plan for Clara, one that seems to mirror traditional advice for hysterics to seek a change of scene yet departing from it in a significant way. Recommending that Mrs. Crayford immediately make plans for Clara to leave their home on the Isle of Wight, he directs her to find a way to travel with Clara to Newfoundland in order for them to meet the remaining Arctic voyagers on their trip home. His reasoning for this unconventional journey is that their inevitable reunion with Clara’s lover Frank Aldersley, whom she imagines is at the brink of death in her visions, would prove to her once and for all that the second sight is mere superstition (168-170). Although Clara and her companions, including Nurse Esther, journey to Newfoundland in each of the previous editions of *The Frozen Deep*, the 1874 text is the first to base this travel on the physician’s recommendation. Within this apparent depiction of the authority of medical science to empirically evaluate claims to supernatural knowledge is thus an ambivalent portrayal of its success in doing so, where Clara’s resistance to medical evaluation is closely followed by her officially sanctioned physical travel to a terrain she would likely have never accessed otherwise.

In this unlikely turn of events, the physician facilitates the dissolution of the boundary between physical and psychical travel for the professed clairvoyant. “I see them in the icy wilderness,” Clara reports while in a trance, as depicted in Collins’s 1866 text. “I am following them over the frozen deep” (14). Her vision, much more specific than

any of those Nurse Esther provided in Dickens's draft, is later matched by her observation of the men as she arrives in Newfoundland. By filling in the details of just how Clara's voyage is made possible, ones left out in the 1866 edition, Collins's later revision configures an uneasy but reciprocal relationship between scientific authority and paranormal discourses in similar terms as expressed in the Franklin clairvoyants' narratives. Culminating in a portrayal of female knowledge that is subversive on multiple levels while also carefully guarded within the matrix of male scientific authority, the final publication of *The Frozen Deep* ultimately offers a portrait of female clairvoyance that provides insight into the mobile and dialectical nature of British cultural responses to this potentially disruptive form of knowledge.

* * *

When Skewes reported in his book on the Franklin search missions that clairvoyants' visions had played a central role in the search efforts, several of the men directly involved in the authorized expeditions endeavored to contain the threat posed by the idea that these national explorations had been guided by anything but the most rigorous technological and geographical knowledge available to the modern British nation. In his narrative of his own journey to the Arctic thirty years before Skewes's published account of the clairvoyants' involvement in Lady Franklin's search missions, McClintock noted the ideological significance of his and other official expeditions, writing that "the glorious mission intrusted to me was in reality a *great national duty*." Aware his fact-gathering mission would be added to the annals of British travel history in a search that had become a national obsession, he asserts that the missions sponsored by

the Admiralty and Lady Franklin “reflect[ed] so much credit upon the Board of Admiralty, [and] were ranked amongst the noblest efforts in the cause of humanity any nation ever engaged in...” (29). McClintock’s and other naval commanders’ letters thus attest to the disruptive potential of spiritual mediums and acts of clairvoyance for British understandings of its imperial project within the Arctic and across its already-established colonies.

Seeking to restore the image of British exploration as a national, masculine endeavor, McClintock and several other Arctic search commanders responded publicly and disparagingly to reports of clairvoyants’ influence upon these investigations. McClintock’s own indignant letter to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* more than forty years after Franklin’s disappearance demonstrates the longevity and ferocity of the debate surrounding the inclusion of unauthorized narratives within a scientific endeavor to collect empirical data about a government-funded expedition. Responding to an article printed in 1889 implying that the route of McClintock’s voyage had been determined partially based on a revelation Lady Franklin had been apprised of, he wrote of the clairvoyants’ visions: “I have yet to learn that any one attached the slightest value to any of them, and least of all the practical people who shared in either the councils of the Arctic commanders or in the confidence of Lady Franklin...” (245). Similarly, William Parker Snow, second-in-command of the *Prince Albert* when it conducted another search funded by Lady Franklin, “‘emphatically’ denied in a letter of the same year to the *St. Stephen’s Review* that they were in any way influenced by ‘revelations’” (Lloyd-Jones 33). In rejecting the possibility that clairvoyants’ efforts contributed to official search

missions, both of these statements reinforce the conceptual divide between scientific endeavors and paranormal travel and in turn portray empirical methods as the only legitimate means of gathering knowledge.

In fact, however, Snow himself had reported experiencing his own supernatural vision of Franklin's expedition just before beginning his journey on the Prince Albert in 1850, where he saw the two abandoned ships surrounded by ice. Although at the time he questioned whether he only "fancied [he] saw" this vision, he felt compelled to send Lady Franklin a letter urging her to direct a search expedition to the location he had conjured, without telling her the reason for his suspicion ("Character Sketch" 377). As in the Coppin account, it is difficult to tell to what extent Snow's ties to the official body of scientists determining his ship's route allowed his private vision to mix with the authorized data, and possibly help decide the Prince Albert's course. Even Snow admits that as his information was obtained not through rigorous physical exploration, but through supernatural insight, it was "very stringently suppressed" (378). Yet according to a biographical sketch on Snow, he was also compelled to emphasize that in spite of his "waking dream," he "was not a mere so-called 'visionary,'" and that any belief that his mission in search of Franklin was guided by supernatural revelations was "erroneous" (377-8). In his and other commanders' contentions that those leading the serious scientific endeavors remained unconvinced by clairvoyant accounts about a voyage Britain's best explorers couldn't locate, McClintock and Snow attempt to reassert the authority of trained British scientists and naval officers. McClintock's and Snow's statements thus attest to the disruptive potential of spiritual mediums and acts of

clairvoyance to the British understanding of its imperial project within the Arctic and across its already-established colonies.

Adding their experiences to the complex domain of Arctic exploration narratives, clairvoyants offered a competing form of knowledge that privileged feminine sensitivity to extrasensory perception over explorers' determination to travel through a frozen tundra that proved nearly impossible to penetrate. In doing so, these paranormal explorers transformed cultural conceptions about the disappearance of Franklin's voyage and subsequent search missions, and undermined official constructions of imperial expansion as being predicated upon a scientific discourse that maintained the boundary between the domestic home and the external realm of empire. If authorized travel narratives envisioned the Arctic as a blank canvas offering a seemingly untroubled possibility for Britain's continued expansion, then the assortment of clairvoyants, and those involved in mediating between their visions of psychic travel and British naval officials' visions of empire, created transnational accumulations of various types of knowledge that destabilized the very boundaries the British imperial project needed to maintain. Such accounts and popular fictional representations of them like *The Frozen Deep* figure significantly in British cultural history, making visible the multiple and multinational voices outside of official narratives that actively shaped discussions about British national identity and the empire's claim to peripheral territories.

Chapter Two

Suffering as Spectacle: Sensationalized Depictions of Racial Violence in Spirit Narratives

At a fairly unremarkable garden party held by Lewis Burtis and his wife in the mid-nineteenth century – unremarkable, that is, apart from the attendance of a “certain celebrated orator and editor of one of the New York State papers” – the guests experienced an extraordinary event. As Emma Hardinge Britten reports in *Modern American Spiritualism*, a young woman had been taken in by the Burtises some months earlier, and was already creating a stir in the local community as a result of “the remarkable manifestation of spirit writing” appearing as “raised letters” on her arm (196). Yet the occurrence of spirit writing was even more shocking that day than it had been previously: the enflamed skin on her arm formed “a distinct and beautifully represented picture of a kneeling man, with a wooly head and African cast of features, a chain round his waist terminating in two balls, which were ingeniously fitted into the veins at the bend of the arm.” Above the image, Britten continues, “was written in fine characters the words, ‘A POOR OLD SLAVE.’”

As extraordinary as the scene was, what is also significant is Britten’s observation of the other party guests as they regarded the manifestation; she notes it provoked “the tearful faces of the rest of the sympathetic group.” Such a reaction, I will contend, is precisely what mediums across America and Britain aimed to elicit, both in their channeling of what they claimed were the spirits of men and women of color and in their subsequent publication of these spirits’ messages. Although engaging their audiences in the spectral presentations was always an objective of conjuring performances, it was

particularly so in these cases, where mediums relayed dramatic narratives of spirits' experiences on Earth of oppression, physical suffering and often violent death and presented them to readers as articles in periodicals and book-length narratives ascribed to spectral authors. The national identity of the medium rarely limited the scope of her conjuring of non-white spirits: British and American mediums alike channeled spirits of men and women allegedly hailing from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, or of Native American descent. My focus here, however, will be on American mediums who published messages from, or accounts of their encounters with, spirits of former slaves and Native Americans, because of the way the nation's history shaped these communications. What emerges in these mediums' publications is that their engagement with America's particular history of colonization and slavery shaped their presentation of the spirit biographies as sensational gothic tales. Teresa Goddu's analysis of nineteenth-century authors' use of gothic fiction in America as a way of contending with their country's history illuminates the ways American mediums such as Fanny Conant and Cora Scott employed similar narrative strategies in publications of messages from spirits of color, as their works render the accounts akin to popular American gothic tales. This chapter builds on Bridget Bennett's assessment of the relationship between the narrative strategies of melodramatic fiction and spirit conjuring performed by mediums in the séance room, as I consider how articles and books distributed by the Spiritualist press invoked similarly sensational effects. Producing and circulating the spectral communications in the form of print media, mediums fashioned the published tales as commodities and encouraged readers' repeated consumption of them.

The chronicles mediums recorded frequently focused on the violence these populations faced through colonization, slavery and genocide, and historians including Molly McGarry have demonstrated that Spiritualists' support for Native American rights and abolition was reflected in the messages they conveyed to their séance patrons and readers. These often appealed to their audiences' sympathy for African-Americans and Native Americans and called attention to the mistreatment of these populations. However, what has been largely overlooked is the way such tales acted as a marketing tool for the mediums, as the gripping stories their spirit guides told disseminated their publications to ever-growing audiences. While Marlene Tromp argues that female mediums' conjuring of non-white spirits destabilized European racial and national stereotypes by establishing an "identification between spirit and medium in the séance," as Christine Ferguson has pointed out, such performances in fact reinforced these notions rather than undoing them (Tromp 78; Ferguson 118-119). Performances and publications by American mediums such as Conant and Scott exemplify this, as the spirits they conjured exhibited, as Patrick Polk maintains, "the crassest of racial stereotypes" informing nineteenth-century racial and imperialist ideologies (27). The non-white spirits these mediums conjured were situated as the protagonists of spirit narratives transformed into horror stories, ostensibly with the aim of eliciting audiences' and readers' sympathy but in a way that generated widely marketable Spiritualist literature. Incorporating tropes and plotlines commonly employed by contemporaneous writers of gothic, sensation and melodramatic fiction into the spirit biographies, mediums exploited the violent history of colonization and slavery as material with which to entertain their audiences.

While male and female mediums alike conjured spirits of African-American and Native American heritage, nineteenth-century gender norms clearly impacted the degree to which explicit violence was presented in the narratives. Records of male mediums' séances point to their much more frequent descriptions of outright physical violence, whereas female mediums' séances and publications more often deployed sentimental and melodramatic language to depict the spectral narrator's victimization. This is particularly evident in Conant's and Scott's published records of their contact with non-white spirits guides, which portray the spirits' suffering while on Earth more obliquely than contemporaneous male mediums' works do. Yet such scenes similarly employ gothic and sensational literary conventions in order to engage their séance audiences and readers. In doing so, the narratives stylize scenes of violence perpetrated against African-Americans and Native Americans and in turn situate audiences and readers as voyeurs of their suffering. However, while I aim in this chapter to critically examine how these narratives functioned as spectacles, I am also conscious of the risk that attends the close reading of such material, as the inclusion of these particular accounts may, in the words of Saidiya Hartman, "reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering" (3). Therefore, I aim to attend to the rhetorical strategies and the effects of these scenes rather than merely reproducing them. My goal, then, is to demonstrate through the analysis of the ways mediums presented narratives by spirits of color as gothic spectacles that the messages figure significantly in the historical construction of ideologies about race and imperialism. As a result of their insight into the market for popular entertainment,

mediums like Conant and Scott widely circulated their spirit messages, but at the expense of rendering the systematic oppression of people of color a source of entertainment.

American Horror Story: Fragmented Spirit Narratives as Tales of Terror

The Fox sisters' communication beginning in 1848 with what they claimed was the specter of a man who had been murdered in their home seemed to open the floodgates for spirits eager to relay their life histories and explain their activities in the afterlife. Throughout the rest of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries, these spirit autobiographies formed much of the content of mediums' messages to their clients as well as their written communications, many of which were subsequently published in Spiritualist newspapers and journals and as collected records of mediums' séances. The subject of these life histories regularly turned to an account of the spirit's entrance into the afterlife, describing the circumstances of his or her death for enquiring audiences and readers. For example, T.H.W.'s *Light on the Future*, a record of his and fellow psychical researchers' communications with spirits, offers numerous "References to Passing Over," where spirits described "seeing such a glorious Light" but "remember[ing] nothing" else of their death, or "waking in this beautiful world and s[eeing] so many friends" (McCorristine 3:313-314). Even those more directly recounting their deaths gloss over the details to offer a similarly comforting depiction of death for readers; a spirit named only "D.D.S." explained to séance attendees, "I am to tell you I fell overboard in a gale. Another thing same day happened; as I attended, an angel taking me near an Island, I saw a beautiful bright Light..." (313).

Such messages of peaceful deaths or even ones glossing over more disturbing circumstances of their demise diverge sharply from the lengthy narratives of suffering that became the focal point of communications by spirits explicitly identified as non-white. The autobiographies mediums on both sides of the Atlantic channeled of these spirits revised the structure of spirit narratives, shifting their focus from pleasant descriptions of the afterlife to the spirit's physical suffering and violent death while on Earth. Although the message's inclusion of such details generated séance attendees' and readers' sympathy, their sensationalist depiction of the horrors that attended slavery and the American military's actions against Native American tribes positioned Spiritualists as consumers of what became "spectacle[s] of sufferance," with the scenes yielding the mediums' patrons a sensation of terror they had the privilege of only ever imagining (Hartman 21).

Whereas publications by some mediums such as Cora Scott presented séance messages from a handful of spirit guides who seemed to regularly speak through them, other texts could contain hundreds of messages obtained throughout the medium's career by spirits who were said to have materialized fleetingly at séances, apparently so satisfied with this appearance that they did not feel the need to make the journey back to be heard from again. Mediums like Jabez Hunt Nixon, who published multiple collections of spirit messages by hundreds of spirits, demonstrated their versatility in seemingly embodying the attributes of an enormous variety of spirits who might be male or female, young or old, and from the full spectrum of class, racial and national identities. With such an array of spectral guides, séance rooms and lecture halls became de facto museums displaying a

collection of what appeared to be representatives of exotic cultures, and works like Nixon's *Beyond the Vail* (1901) served as the records further disseminating them. Of particular interest to Spiritualists long after the abolition of slavery were messages from spirits describing themselves as former slaves and cataloguing the horrors of their lives on Earth; one slave Nixon channeled, "Faith," characterized herself as "[a]n innocent victim of the curse of chattel slavery" (424). Although it was published more than three decades after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, the message bears similarities to those transmitted by mediums like Conant during the Civil War. Faith's statement that she has "been assured that [telling her story] will be of great benefit to the world" thus is belied by its publication so many years after the institution it critiques has been outlawed. It becomes clear while reading the narrative that its depiction of what Nixon describes as "an endless hell for her" in fact serves to attract and enthrall readers.

Teresa Goddu contends that "[t]he scene of slavery was often represented as gothic during the antebellum period" in newspapers and fiction writing, and Faith's message demonstrates the way that Spiritualist writing and performances invoked gothic conventions to dramatize beyond-the-grave slave narratives (133). While only a brief account of her life and death, the message Nixon relays is punctuated by subheadings crafted to draw readers in, such as "Sad Accident That Sealed Her Doom" and "The Fatal Revelation" (425). Faith describes the master as a kind man, but points out early on that he was also her father and had promised her mother, an "indulged upper servant," the child's free papers only when she became an adult, suggesting to readers what Patrick Polk characterizes as "the palpable horror engendered by a system in which females

could be made the playthings of masters” and foreshadowing that Faith will never attain freedom (33). With her father’s death from a hunting accident removing the possibility of him ever following through on his promise to free her, Faith is sold by the family to a “low, degraded brute” and quickly becomes the target of his sexual advances (426). Although the narrative condemns the slave owner for his cruelty and lechery, it also is complicit in the sexualization of Faith, repeatedly describing her as “beautiful” earlier on as a way of foreshadowing her future victimization. Employing the trope of the “lascivious master... and innocent slave girl” to enthrall readers, the message Nixon mediated and published exploits the history of female slaves’ sexual abuse for the purpose of further publicizing Spiritualist beliefs.

It is at this point in the narrative that Faith’s message shifts from merely resembling gothic fiction to become a horror story, as Faith reports that her refusal of her new master’s sexual demands earns her the punishment of being “tied to the whipping-post and given three hundred lashes,” after which she is “to be given to a brutal negro for a wife” (426). Published amid the emergence of horror fiction as a popular genre, the account exhibits a similar propensity for “indulging in more graphic imagery and extreme scenarios... and soliciting a more visceral response from its readership” with its explicit description of her vicious punishment and subsequent torment (Hurley 192-193). Devoting a full paragraph to documenting Faith’s punishment, the message rouses the sympathy and indignation of readers but also attends with greater emphasis to presenting an account of Faith’s suffering in a way that makes it a spectacle of sadistic violence enacted against the black body. According to Faith, “[t]he pain of the lash was more than

I could endure, and I swooned away. When I regained consciousness, I found myself in a pool of my own blood” (426). Figuring Faith as a passive and silent victim of torture as she awakens only to its ghastly results, the text garners readers’ pity for her but does so by reinscribing her objectification as readers are left with the enduring image of her abjection and helplessness. The message’s sustained focus on her torture, in sharp contrast to the majority of communications relayed by mediums in séances and publications which concentrated on providing advice or information about the afterlife, leaves readers with the image of her in a state of physical and mental anguish rather than achieving the type of spiritual transcendence emphasized in other death narratives. That it continues to document her suffering demonstrates Hartman’s contention that “[t]orture and torment both generated enjoyment”; readers learn the shocking details of the sadistic scene from a safe distance (26). With Faith’s opening pronouncement about the potential for the depiction of the horrors of slavery to “be of great benefit to the world,” the narrative is presented as a necessarily honest exposure of racial violence, obscuring the fact that it capitalizes on the historical victimization and abuse of African-Americans.

In what became commonplace for narratives by spirits of color, Faith relates the details of her subsequent suicide, which is portrayed less as a moment of resistance against her master’s plans for her to marry a fellow slave and labor alongside the others after recovering from her beating and more an extension of her pitiful condition. Despite being “so sore I could not move but with the most excruciating pain,” Faith struggles “for hours to drag myself to the river bank, distant only a few yards” and finally succeeds the next day in “roll[ing] off the bank into the water” to drown herself. Faith reports that she

achieves “a panacea for all my troubles” only in death, and suggests that her role in the afterlife offsets the injustices she suffered as a slave. She explains that there, “we have neither master nor slave,” and her task is “to help those to progress who were guilty of selling their own flesh and blood,” thus devoting herself to securing the salvation of slave owners like her father. With such a pleasant depiction of the afterlife and Faith’s role in facilitating the process of slave owners earning redemption for their crimes and familial betrayals, Spiritualist readers could take comfort in the idea that the justice meted out in the afterlife compensates for the horrors of the system of slavery. Concluding the tale on this note, Faith’s message to Nixon’s readers provides all the elements of a story devised to captivate readers, and in doing so profits off of the violent history of slavery.

Whereas lengthy and graphic descriptions of the cruelty former slaves and other men and women of color endured before their deaths appeared regularly in séances and published records of them by male mediums, this was less frequently the case in female mediums’ work. For example, while the famed medium Catherine Berry reports to having been witness to a séance where a spirit named “Ambo,”¹⁰ described as a former slave who died as a child, “gave an account of the cruelty he had to suffer on this sphere,” she provides no further details of the “painful” message he relayed (26). Instead, she leaves readers to imagine the more horrifying elements of the account that shocked her so much she “sent him away.” Yet there are a handful of published messages recorded by female

¹⁰ This name and variations thereof are frequently cited in Spiritualist literature as the names of African spirits, and are clearly derived from “Sambo,” a derogatory term for a black person. The *OED* traces its first usage to 1704, where it was invoked in the *Boston News-Letter* (1704-1776) as a nickname for a “Runaway from his Master.”

mediums that resemble the more vivid male mediums' accounts, such as Elizabeth Sweet's chapter in her collection of spirit messages, *The Future Life*, which was published by her husband in 1869 after her death a decade earlier. As with Nixon's conjuring of Faith, the spirit who relays his experiences through Sweet of being enslaved does not appear to have been a regular spirit guide of the medium; in fact, he is never even identified by name. The account thus emblemizes the way that publications by mediums such as Sweet and Nixon that served as mass compilations of spirit messages erased these narrators' individual identities.

With its title promising readers a dramatic tale of misery and oppression like that in Nixon's publication, Sweet's chapter, "The Slave," reinscribes the spirit-author's identity as defined by his dehumanized status. Unlike Faith's message, which slowly builds toward the most horrifying experiences she endured, Sweet's chapter immediately conveys the cruelty to which the former slave had been subjected as he explains early on in the narrative: "I was born amid slavery and wretchedness, fed on food which was not even offered to the dogs that belonged to my master, and I was daily lashed – my poor flesh laid open to the bone – to please the passionate whim of a brutal owner" (196). Its placement of these grisly details at the opening captures the attention of Sweet's séance patrons and future readers for the remainder of the account, the vast majority of which recounts his spiritual development in the afterlife. Sweet's record dates the message as having been received on December 26, 1853, not long after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act which subsequently galvanized abolitionists, and its portrayal of the slave master's brutality would have served as a means of maintaining Spiritualists' support for

emancipation. However, these details also fashioned the slave as an embodied victim much in the way that in popular melodrama, “injury and punishment defined the personhood of these characters” (Hartman 26). As an anonymous victim of his master, Sweet’s spectral correspondent is more a representation of the injustice of slavery than a human being. Figured as spectators of his experiences of degradation and torture, séance attendees and readers are thus presented a view of the black body as the locus of abjection.

The portion of the narrative focusing on this spirit’s life on Earth concludes shortly thereafter by explaining the reason for his death: after having his beloved wife and child taken away from him, he lost all hope and struck and killed his master in a fit of rage. In response, he exclaims, “They beat me to death!” (196-197). A much more concise account of his death than Faith’s message is of hers, it is nonetheless designed to shock séance participants and readers, sensationalizing the violence intrinsic to the system of slavery for the purpose of provoking an affective response in the reader. As was particularly the case in narratives like this by those who made isolated appearances, the former slave’s suffering is constructed as a horror story for Spiritualists’ enjoyment. And while its explicit depiction of the torment the former slave was subjected to engages readers, it also reassures them by containing the threat posed by his anger. The spirit reveals that after a short time in the spirit world, he finds his former master had been taken to “a dreary, dismal place” as punishment for his deeds, leading the former slave to pity him and “beg” his companion spirit to “intercede for my tormentor” (200). Closing the narrative by expressing his gratitude for being happy in the afterlife and having the

“privilege of coming” to speak to séance patrons, the account leaves readers with the comforting notion that this spirit attained peace in the afterlife. While it suggests that the afterlife mitigates the effects of the lived experiences of racial violence, its representation of African-Americans as objects of entertainment and its commodification of the history of slavery in fact attest to the enduring legacy of racial oppression as well as to the ways that mediums’ performances of the ghosts of men and women of color helped perpetuate it.

Veiled Violence: Fanny Conant’s Mediation of African-American and Native American Spirits

Like many mediums, Fanny Conant claimed to have been beset by ill-health from a young age, and reported that psychic visions often attended these ailments; during her mother’s life-threatening illness in 1840, when Conant was nine years old, spectral guides first appeared to the medium. This steady stream of apparitions, beginning with Epimenides, who informed her he was an “ancient Greek” and had come in answer to her prayers for her mother’s recovery, served as the impetus for her later employment with the influential Spiritualist journal the *Banner of Light* (Putnam 17-21). Nearly every week for 18 years, Conant compiled messages from numerous spirits and published them as a column called “The Messenger”; as the journal became one of the most influential Spiritualist periodicals by the end of her tenure, these messages circulated widely among American readers. In fact, according to Emma Hardinge Britten, “[i]t was mainly through the influence of wise Spirits communicating through Mrs. Conant, that the *Banner of Light* was established at all” (444). Conant’s ability to channel hundreds of spirits during

the course of her career ensured a vast and varied readership seeking advice and solace through the published communications.

Particularly intriguing to her readers and séance patrons, her biographers and contemporaries note, was her conjuring of spirits who identified themselves as Native American, African-American, or Indian; their messages present each of these spirit guides as exoticized figures, rendering her column the print version of an ethnographic museum display. Prior to and during the Civil War, “The Messenger” regularly featured communications by those identified as former slaves, which often detailed the violence they suffered at the hands of slave owners. These complemented the numerous articles the editors of the *Banner of Light* printed as well as the books they advertised on the subject in support of the abolitionist cause (McGarry 4, 54). Yet while they appealed to readers who supported abolition throughout the Civil War, they did so by emphasizing the former slaves’ victimization and rendering the readers consumers of tales in which the slaves were objectified and abused. In the process, the *Banner of Light* profited from the history of slavery by publishing Conant’s records of the communications, transforming what it advertised as “messages from departed Spirits to their friends and relatives on earth” into gothic tales.

Like many of her female colleagues who presented narratives to their séance patrons and readers, Conant seemed to have a penchant for conjuring non-white spirits whose histories suggested their suffering rather than explicitly describing the violent details of their ordeals. This delicate handling of such events accorded with gendered expectations for middle-class women like Conant, for whom discussions of extreme

violence were deemed inappropriate, and contrasted sharply with the often gruesome details in messages male mediums conveyed. For example, although several of Conant's messages implied the sexual violence inflicted on female slaves by indicating that the authors were the children of enslaved women and their white masters, "A Communication Addressed to an Uncle," a message attributed to the mediumship of J.D.S. and appearing in the column adjoining an installment of "The Messenger," depicted a slave master's rape of one of his slaves. While ostensibly describing this scene to highlight the slave owner's "villainy," its comment that the slave was "the victim to the tyrant's lust, subjected to the coarsest brutality of his lecherous passions," instead reinscribes the slave as a sexualized object in order to sensationalize the story ("A Communication Addressed to an Uncle"). The communications Conant claimed to channel avoided such direct references to sexual violence, but similarly employed the trope of the victimized slave. With each of the narratives by former slaves immediately marked as such by the titles of their accounts – the description "A Slave" or "Colored" follows their names – the dramatic stories they told not only appealed to readers' sympathy, but also drew their eye toward what was characterized as first-hand accounts of the dehumanizing effects of slavery.

Recounted with less explicit detail than that given in the account relayed by J.D.S., Conant's spirit messages nevertheless evoke the horror of slavery in a way that recalls the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century gothic novel. George Haggerty argues that Gothic fiction's "primary formal aim is the emotional and psychological involvement of the reader," and the accounts Conant published employ conventions

common to the genre to elicit just such a response (18). In particular, a message from “Benjamin” to Conant’s readers describes in oblique yet unsettling terms how he “was doomed to live and die a slave” (“Benjamin – A Slave”). The language he uses to describe his psychological torment implies that slavery was the ultimate gothic imprisonment, yet unlike the gothic novel, it was “not staged but real” (Goddu 136). According to Benjamin, “My soul felt the fetters of Slavery, and my body was accursed.... I groaned for liberty, and my soul felt that it was prisoned in the flesh.” While omitting any direct reference to physical violence, the message suggests to readers that slavery refigured the slave’s body as the instrument of his own torture as it describes the institution as a “prison” for the soul. As a slave narrative from beyond the grave – the grave into which Benjamin had been driven by his enslavement – the account becomes a horror story for white Spiritualists’ entertainment, eliciting their sympathy by providing a glimpse from a safe distance of slaves’ lifelong misery.

Although Benjamin, like other spectral slaves Conant channeled, portrays his death as a release from slavery, his account also suggests that in some ways, his suffering continued even after death. Making it clear that his intellectual confinement contributed to his suffering as much as his physical torment had, Benjamin explains that his involuntary ignorance continued to haunt him as a spirit: “Your philosophy teaches you that we are the same after death as before, [; ...] our identity, our personality, remains the same,” he reminds Conant’s readers. “So, then, I had no greater powers upon entering the spirit-world than those that were mine upon the earth.” Calling himself “ignorant” in life and as a spirit, he conveys the message to his white, educated readers that slavery’s

victimization of African-American men and women transcends earthly boundaries. His focus here on his intellectual deprivation rather than on the physical violence slaves endured thus contrasts with the emphasis in male mediums' publications on racialized embodiment but continues to center on the construction of African-Americans as perpetually intellectually limited. Designed to remind readers of the injustice of the system of slavery, Conant's mediation of Benjamin's story also reinforces conceptions of African-Americans as passive and disempowered.

Such a depiction reemerges in numerous other spirit slave narratives Conant printed in "The Messenger," rendering the tales more palatable to a white readership by portraying the spirits' response to their treatment as simple resignation rather than anger. Several of the narratives go so far as to portray the spirits' apparent happiness with their condition, and even those who denounce the system of slavery as a whole express positive sentiments about their own masters. In an account by "Peter Sheldon," for example, the former slave explains that despite his happiness to enter the spirit world, "I like to belong to [his master] pretty well, [... and] like to live with Massa Sheldon" ("Peter Sheldon [A Slave]"). However, Sheldon's positive appraisal of his condition, which reflected many other messages published in Conant's column, countered other accounts such as "Joe's" that expressed bitterness over the violence they had endured at the hands of their masters. Signaling the continuation of his subordinate position after death as many of Conant's messages did by referring not only to his former master, but to any white person, as "Massa," Joe nevertheless expresses indignation about his master's treatment of him, contending that "he's not any right" to abuse him as he had. According

to the spectral narrator, “He told me to tote something over – tote it over to neighbor Brown’s, and I did. And he told me to come straight back, he says. I didn’t hear him say that, so I stayed; and when I came back, he pulled my ears. It’s the last thing he do” prior to Joe’s death from illness days later. Joe’s emphasis on the capriciousness of this punishment after he “tote all his things for him” underscores for readers of Conant’s column one of the more terrifying elements of slaves’ experiences: the unpredictability of the violence they encountered. While his punishment was mild in comparison to that recalled in the narratives conjured by male mediums, Joe hints that it was not the only abuse he suffered as a slave, merely “[t]he last thing he’s done to me.” And while it was a punishment inflicted with the intention of infantilizing him, Joe makes it clear that it caused considerable pain, averring, “Massa, he did hurt, I can tell you.” In describing abuse simultaneously designed to injure and humiliate him, Joe’s account leads readers to imagine the horrors of slavery, becoming a tale of terror through the power of suggestion rather than outright violence.

Joe’s narrative, like those by other former slaves, thus serves to evoke readers’ sympathy but also their pity. Highlighting this particular incident, however, also situates him as a degraded figure within the narrative, his remark that his master had “not any right to pull my ears” casting him more as a petulant child than the wizened spirit he characterizes himself as. Reinforcing this is the phrasing of Joe’s narrative; to prove that Conant transcribed the message verbatim, it is filled with ostensibly “authentic” African-American dialect such as: “We – we – we gets the permission to come, and who’s to say we not talk here? I is not afraid...” The narrative thus performs a form of minstrelsy

mirroring the “derogatory performative modes of racial essentialism” typifying Spiritualist invocations of black spirits, highlighting for readers Joe’s social and educational deficiency (Polk 27). In illuminating the disempowerment and unpredictable violence attending his life as a slave, Joe’s narrative reasserts his position as an object of pity for the *Banner of Light*’s readers, his lifelong debasement following him even after death.

This use of language as a marker of difference extends to virtually all of the accounts by non-white spirits that Conant relayed, contributing to their propagation of racist stereotypes. Her mediumship of messages from Native American spirits, like those from former slaves, depicts for readers and séance patrons the suffering of the tribes as they were subjected to genocidal military campaigns that continued throughout the nineteenth century. Similarly printed with a view toward garnering her readers’ sympathy, the broken English in which the spectral guides told their tales portrayed them “as a people at one with nature, untainted by civilization, and blessed by an innate spirituality untouched by modernity” (McGarry 72). Such a romanticized notion was underscored by the direct manner of speech the accounts employed, where the Native American spirits told of the violence they encountered in plain and forceful words. At once thrilling readers with dramatic references to the bloody skirmishes and reassuring them of their cultural superiority, the messages became an effective means for Conant to demonstrate her ability to conjure an array of spirits.

The communications from a spirit guide named “White Antelope,” whose multiple appearances were recorded in “The Messenger,” employ similarly simple

language to decry the violence his community endured at the hands of Colonel Chivington, but his descriptions of the events and prophecies of vengeance are more forceful than those in Conant's other channeled messages. Molly McGarry observes that in the late 1860s, Native American spirits began "issuing increasingly militant warnings" in the context of vicious military campaigns against them and Spiritualists' subsequent support for the otherwise unpopular cause of Native American rights (86-88). One of White Antelope's messages appears to be a direct response to the infamous battle at Sand Creek, where under the command of Chivington, American soldiers had slaughtered more than 150 members of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, most of whom were women and children (Kelman 11). His threats to Chivington, such as "White Antelope will follow on his trail as long as there is one of his people left; and he will die like a dog, with nothing to bury him with" reflects the rhetorical shift in North American spirit messages that McGarry describes. Yet its vivid depiction of revenge, as well as his reminders to Conant's readers of the brutality of the American military's campaigns against the tribes, presents a conflicting image of the Native American warrior as both a pitiable and fear-inspiring figure. Teresa Goddu argues that early to mid-nineteenth century American literature frequently "depict[ed] the Indian as America's chief gothic material" in order to justify the military's genocidal campaigns, and "The Messenger" extends such a representation to Spiritualist publications in spite of the community's support for the vanishing tribes (56). By drawing upon this characterization of the Native American so as to dramatize the messages, Conant's column became a vehicle for reasserting imperialist ideologies.

In castigating Chivington and the American military, White Antelope's messages address the brutality to which Native Americans were subjected much more directly than Conant's communications with former slaves describe their ordeals. Conant's conjuring of these spirits thus allowed her to challenge the gender norms shaping her other messages' more veiled manner of referring to violence, but did so by way of recording accounts that reproduced the trope of the vengeful Indian and sensationalized the massacre of Native Americans. White Antelope's message describes Chivington as "he who cuts the throats of squaws and papooses," appealing to readers' sympathy with the image of the innocent women and children who were helpless against male violence. Rather than merely recounting these ordeals, however, White Antelope threatens retribution against Chivington and his men. In contrast to the communications more typically published by mediums which offered greetings and advice or detailed the spirit's pleasant experiences in the afterlife, those Conant claimed were narrated by White Antelope and other Native American spirits reflected their engagement with ongoing debates about Native American rights, as they frequently called for justice and were cited in support of efforts to protect the tribes from further American military aggression (McGarry 88). With their threats and combative tone, however, the effects of the messages by White Antelope extended beyond merely enlisting readers' support for halting the massacres. With warnings that "White Antelope curses" Chivington and "he has stirred [his people] to war... and many white men will die," the narrative offers a shifting portrayal of White Antelope and his community as at turns sympathetic and menacing figures ("White Antelope [An Indian]"). He appears to delight in the idea of his

persecutor's violent demise, initially asking Conant to "[t]ell him the blood of those he killed at Sand Creek is writing his own death-knell, and soon it will come upon him" ("White Antelope"). Although reminding readers of Chivington's depravity, the message simultaneously presents White Antelope as bloodthirsty himself. He is thus portrayed through his prophecies of supernatural vengeance as the "gothic monster" Goddu argues white Americans were "[t]aught from infancy to see the Indian as," regardless of the justification for his threats (57). Operating as the source of information about the massacre of his community as well as the embodiment of the vengeful Native American, White Antelope reflects the ambivalence white Americans felt about the vanishing of the tribes.

Like White Antelope, Sagoyewatha, another of Conant's Native American spirit guides, recalls in vivid detail the murderous rampages of American settlers and missionaries, berating them for their hypocrisy in espousing Christian beliefs yet driving Native Americans from their land. Declaring, "Your religion has sharpened your long knives and loaded your long guns. [...] Your religion has made rivers of blood at your feet," his account signals more than just a shift in Native American spirit performances "from content to militant" ("Sagoyewatha [an Indian]"; McGarry 91). Like White Antelope's, his rebuke of settlers for their misdeeds evokes imagery of the slaughter of Native Americans; adopting the narrative conventions of gothic fiction, Sagoyewatha's message becomes both a warning to white settlers against further incursions and a tale aimed at producing an affective response from readers. In the process, the account shifts

the focus of Conant's column from dispensing advice and reassuring narratives about the afterlife to increasing the *Banner of Light's* readership through its sensational tales.

The sharp contrast in language and tone between messages from Native American men and women, however, demonstrates how gender norms shaped the ways the accounts deployed literary conventions. While White Antelope's and Sagoyewatha's reports transfixed Conant's readers with the grim details of warfare, the messages by spirits Conant identifies as "Indian maidens" present sentimental narratives alluding to their victimization but without explicitly describing the massacres. While appearing in print during the 1860s and 1870s as had those by the warriors, the messages by "maidens" followed an earlier model Bennett observes to have structured late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century American literary depictions, where "the Indian was constructed as tragic and romantic" rather than militant (104). Epitomizing ideal femininity in their passivity and innocence, female Native American spirit guides such as "Metoka," "Spring-Flower" and "Voosh-ti" regularly imparted through Conant messages for séance patrons as well as providing readers of the medium's biography and the *Banner of Light* with poetry, stories and accounts of their lives on Earth. Whereas the warriors appeared to plot revenge against white settlers and soldiers, the narratives by "maidens" portrayed them as young and childlike, their virtue in the face of death rendering them akin to heroines in gothic novels. In channeling these spirits for her séances and column, Conant capitalized on popular interest in the fate of Native Americans, their idealized attributes captivating patrons and readers.

Whereas other mediums often entertained with performances of angry and aggressive female Native American spirits such as in the case of Bessie Fitzgerald's conjuring of "Dewdrop," who scandalized Fitzgerald's patrons with a show of "devilry" that made "their hair stand on end," Conant claimed to be attended by spirits who exhibited either motherly or girlish characteristics (Marryat 155). Rather than inspiring fear in her patrons and readers as intended by Fitzgerald's performances and the representation of Conant's warrior spirit guides, the "Indian maidens" appeared as the martyrs of their melodramatic sagas. Conant's spirit guide "Metoka," who is named as the author of several poems and stories recorded by Conant's biographer, epitomizes such characteristics, with the "squaw" relating her tragic death which occurred just after she gave birth to her daughter "Winona," whose tribulations Metoka proceeds to detail (Putnam 156-157). In the poem she relays through Conant, titled "The Indian Maiden Winona," the motherly spirit turns Conant's readers' attention to her "strong and beauteous" teenage daughter, "child of Nature" and destined martyr (157). Exemplifying how, as Bennett has assessed, Spiritualists employed the tropes of melodramas and sentimental fiction in their séances and writing, Metoka laments Winona's self-sacrifice as she agrees to be killed by her warrior father rather than surrender as a captive of the Americans (Bennett 116; Putnam 158). Implicit in her narrative poem is the horror of the threat Winona faces of "*being captured and enslaved by the conquering tribe,*" particularly as "the conquering tribe" in this case is the ruthless "white man" (156, emphasis Putnam's). Foreshadowing the tribe's immanent destruction, the poem presents the image of the soldiers closing in on Winona's community:

Then the strange voice of the white man
Rung through all our hunting-ground;
And their swift feet never faltered
When they neared our sacred mounds! (157)

Avoiding explicit depictions of violence even when describing Winona's death, the poem instead evokes a sense of impending doom to create a gothic atmosphere. Virtuous and passive even in her resistance against the white settlers' attempt to capture her alongside what they have already "rob[bed from] the Indian," Winona's victimization and self-abnegation become the central attraction of the tale (158).

Metoka's narrative is one of many by Conant's female spirit guides depicting Native Americans' decisions to die rather than be captured by the colonizing forces; in fact, one of the "Indian maiden[s who] assumed the position of attendant spirit" to Conant, "Spring-Flower," declares through her that she committed suicide (182-183). Described as childlike in her "acquisitiveness and curiosity," Spring-Flower's entertainment of Conant's patrons at both public and private séances with lighthearted stunts such as opening and closing windows is juxtaposed against briefly-noted details including the information that she had been a member of the Sioux tribe (182-183). A revenant that is "frequently seen, in spirit, near the spot where she met her death," Spring-Flower's haunting of the landscape infused Conant's séances with a melancholic atmosphere as she reminded her patrons of the countless victims of American colonialism. With the few details Conant relays about Spring-Flower aside from her impishness and her haunting of the landscape, the spirit becomes a metaphor for the vanishing Native American and America's violent history.

Although Putnam explains that Spring-Flower was Conant's spirit guide for only a short time, as she had "other duties to discharge," the controlling spirit who took her place, "Voosh-ti," apparently remained a "constant attendant" to the medium, exhibiting "assiduous attention" while also captivating séance patrons with her tales (Putnam 183, 188). Her name immediately signals to readers of Conant's biography her status as a victim; Putnam explains that the name means "The Captive" and that her mother named her this because she resembled a woman from Illinois who had been abducted by their tribe while making the journey to California (188-189).¹¹ According to Voosh-ti's narrative, the white woman had been taken as another wife to the chief, who was already married to Voosh-ti's mother; the scorned wife concentrated her feelings of "jealousy and anger" on the woman and "the great effect of pre-natal influences" resulted in her daughter "resembl[ing] a white child far more than an Indian," therefore earning the hatred of her mother. Uniting folkloric beliefs in maternal impression with an account designed to elicit readers' and séance patrons' compassion, the messages from the "strangely marked" child preyed upon the fears of attacks by Native Americans that had been cultivated by reports in the press, in order to fashion the narrative as a gothic tale for Conant's clients and readers. As a cast-off child who seemed to share a racial affinity with Conant and her patrons yet was intriguing to Spiritualists as an "oppressed little one" of Native American heritage, Conant's spirit guide served as an unthreatening representative of otherness and the haunting history of colonization (189).

¹¹ Its various spellings in the published messages also reflect Conant's séance patrons' own colonizing gesture; Putnam reveals that they took it upon themselves to rename her "Vashti" because "Voosh-ti" was too difficult for "pronunciation by white lips" (188).

As with the other tales of Conant's Native American as well as African-American spirit guides, both in the *Banner of Light* and in records of her séances like Putnam's, the details of Voosh-ti's death are vague, yet the message intimates the brutality attending it. Putnam's biography explains that she met her "violent death at the hands of the cavalry" when she was only seven years old, but until then had been "a favorite with the soldiers and officers at the neighboring fort" (189). No reasoning behind her execution is given, leaving readers to wonder why a young child of whom the soldiers appeared to be fond would be killed, and serving as a reminder of the violence pervading American colonization. At the same time, by conjuring such a young and innocent spirit, Conant called attention to this dark history in a way that made it palatable to Spiritualists. Appropriating it to entertain her patrons and readers of her column, Conant drew upon melodramatic and gothic literary tropes in her performances of non-white spirits. While avoiding the graphic depictions of the violence so readily incorporated into male mediums' performances and publications, she nevertheless sensationalized the conjuring of non-white spirit guides, thus reinscribing their position as sources of entertainment for white audiences.

A "Strange Vision": Cora L.V. Scott and the Dramatization of Colonial Violence

As one of the most renowned mediums in America, Cora L.V. Scott's¹² career began in 1851 when she was only eleven years old, and ended with her death in 1923 after seven decades of holding séances, giving public lectures, and penning over a dozen

¹² Scott went on to marry four times, and thus adopted and published under the surnames of Hatch, Daniels, Tappan and Richmond (Braude 86n).

books on Spiritualism. Like Conant, Scott claimed to have channeled hundreds of spirits as a medium, but also had a select few spirit guides appear on a fairly regular basis, controlling her as she spoke while entranced to large crowds and smaller groups in private séances. An extremely prolific writer, Scott insisted that much of the material in her publications was transcribed from messages given by these spirits. She credited one of her frequent guides, “Ouina,” as the source of numerous short stories and poems in addition to individualized messages provided to séance attendees. Described in *Discourses through the Mediumship of Mrs. Cora L.V. Tappan* as a “gentle Indian maiden,” Ouina had been born to a Spanish mother, the sole survivor of a shipwreck off the coast of Virginia years before Columbus set sail for America, and a Native American chieftain who had rescued her (84-85). Harrison Delivan Barrett, Scott’s biographer, professes that “Ouina’s history reads like a story of the Orient, and presents many charming pictures to our view” (84). The mid-nineteenth century fascination with romanticized tales about Native Americans ensured that with such a history, she would attract ever more clients to Scott and believers in the movement. Frequently the object of her patrons’ gaze herself – Ann Braude wryly notes that “Cora Hatch’s golden curls became among the best-documented facts of modern Spiritualism” – Scott was well aware of the potential for youth and beauty to attract audiences (87). Commoditizing Ouina as she herself had been, Scott presented the specter in a way that rendered her a sentimental heroine while simultaneously exploiting her as an exoticized Other.

Although Scott called upon well over a dozen spirit guides who appeared over the course of her career, Ouina was the most popular among her séance and lecture audiences

(Lehman 122). Capitalizing on this fame, Scott had many of her poems and messages of advice to readers printed in the *Banner of Light* and even published a collection of tales called *Ouina's Canoe*; Scott's biographer also devoted a chapter to her in his *Life Work of Mrs. Cora L.V. Richmond*. Rather than presenting a series of Native American spirits such as those in Conant's *Banner of Light* column, Scott used the writing she published but attributed to Ouina to cultivate a persona for the spectral guide that endeared her to the medium's followers and maintained their interest in the lengthy writings. Barrett's chapter on Ouina, together with *Ouina's Canoe* and the poetry within Scott's *Discourses*, all revolve around nearly identical narratives recalling Ouina's lineage, life and death. With their focus on the tragic circumstances of Ouina's demise and the wider context of the sustained violence perpetrated against Native Americans, however, the repetitiveness of the texts also marks a continual return to the traumatic history of American colonization for Spiritualists to endlessly consume, with Ouina serving as a haunting reminder of this past.

Ouina's short life on Earth mirrors those of Conant's female Native American spirit guides, particularly with regard to its most poignant detail: according to Barrett's chapter and her narrative in *Ouina's Canoe*, her mother, like Winona's, died when giving birth to her and Ouina was killed at a young age, just prior to an incursion by American soldiers. This sentimental plotline running through the maidens' accounts naturalizes the idea of early and tragic death being Native Americans' destiny during a time in which the figure of the vanishing Indian was becoming "a staple of American literature and popular culture" (McGarry 71). A "strange vision" of Ouina's which came when she was fifteen

years old, Barrett reports, in fact foretold just such a vanishing of her own people, setting in motion the circumstances leading up to her death but also providing readers with a sentimentalized depiction of the tribe's future suffering (88). According to the account Scott relayed in *Ouina's Canoe*, Ouina was informed by her mother, who spoke to her during her vision, that her "father's people would be scattered like the leaves of the forest in autumn when swept by the wind" and ships carrying "pale faced warriors ... would drive all the Red men away, taking their hunting grounds and their streams" (13). Her retelling of the prediction tempers the prophecy that the tribe would be brutally eradicated with language aestheticizing the deaths. By likening the dying Native Americans to "the leaves of the forest" and emphasizing their spiritual connection to the "hunting grounds" and "streams," the account also echoes nostalgic depictions in other spirit narratives as well as in contemporaneous popular American literature in the era. This idealization of Native Americans as living outside of civilization – reinforced by Ouina's existence prior to U.S. nationhood – not only presents them as "doomed to extinction" as a result of their incompatibility with modernity, but also fashions them as relics on display for Scott's readers (Goddu 55).

Yet in contrast to Ouina's fairly impassive prognostication in *Ouina's Canoe* that her tribe, like hundreds of others throughout Europeans' colonization of the United States, would perish, the portrait of this given in Scott's *Discourses* paints a darker portrait of the events. "Ouina's Poem" portrays her tribe's existence prior to colonization as idyllic, as "[a]ll the Westland was our home then," but quickly shifts its tone as it explains that all this ended with the appearance of "the pale faced warrior" who

caused “our darkest woes” (15-16; 65-66). With a bitterness reminiscent of the messages by the male warriors Conant channeled, ““Ouina’s’ Poem” explains that the colonizers “brought fire-arrows to slay us,/ Saying ‘twas his right divine,”” exposing the hypocrisy of their use of religion to justify mass murder (16/66). Despite its bitter words here, however, ““Ouina’s’ Poem” refrains from using the more violent imagery such as that in White Antelope’s or Sagoyewatha’s messages, even when describing the massacre itself:

One by one my race have perished
Far toward the setting sun:
They are driven – killed and driven –
And their race is nearly run.

Instead of focusing on each of the slayings, Scott’s channeling of Ouina’s verses presents a tableau of the vanishing Native American in a way that mirrors the rhetoric of *Ouina’s Canoe*, their deaths romanticized by their association with “the setting sun.” Like earlier nineteenth-century fiction such as James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, the poem presents a sentimental picture of their massacre for readers to “lament ... the fate of a dying race” (McGarry 71). Even in what becomes Ouina’s sternest critique of European colonization, the deaths she decries become a spectacle for readers.

It is when Ouina describes her death at the hands of her own tribe, however, that her narrative becomes more explicitly gothic, with her father interpreting her portent of doom for the community as originating from an “evil spirit” who is attempting to mislead the chieftain about the fate of his people (Barrett 91). Claiming to his council of fellow chieftains that if this spirit succeeds, he “will drink the life blood of my people,” Ouina’s father proposes that the only way to prevent “this spirit of darkness” from harming them is to kill Ouina (Richmond 16). On one hand characterizing the chieftain as a misguided

tyrant whose hubris sets in motion Ouina's sacrifice, the scene also suggests that the reason for Native Americans' demise is their primitive superstition. *Ouina's Canoe* and Barrett's biography each devote a lengthy segment to detailing the prophecy, the chieftain's decision and particularly Ouina's death scene in an effort to heighten the suspense for readers, engaging them in the story by appropriating techniques of gothic and sensation fiction. The scene dramatically unfolds in *Ouina's Canoe* with Ouina's father ordering her death: "twenty young braves were chosen [to kill her] ...; they were bade to prepare their arrows in the poison of the mandrake" while the women readied the fire which was to burn Ouina's body (17). Focusing on the prelude to the heroine's death to a much greater extent than the messages Conant published, the narrative demonstrates that the objective is to entertain readers as a form of sensation literature for Spiritualists. In doing so, Ouina's messages in Scott's publication and Barrett's biography of the medium recast what began as a critique of European colonization and the ongoing massacres of the Native American populace by the American military as the thrilling "story of the Orient" Barrett promises readers at the outset of his chapter.

With the purported motivation behind the publication of Ouina's messages being the increase in awareness of the genocide of Native Americans, the narrative of Ouina's death resembles the melodramatic content of sensation fiction but is framed as literature suitable for middle-class readers. The scene of Ouina's death is the focal point of both Barrett's chapter and *Ouina's Canoe*, both of which provide lengthy descriptions of the event; the latter in particular lingers on melodramatic details such as the reactions of the "squaws" to her father's decree, who "wept and moaned for me then, and called me

‘murdered princess’” (17). Both also take care to point out that, as Barrett relates, Ouina was “denuded of all her clothing” after being abducted by the warriors commanded to kill her; the emphasis on this detail in the various versions of the narrative indicates her objectification was central to Scott’s depiction of the spectral guide (92). Clearly the selling point of *Ouina’s Canoe*, the narrative seems to emphasize the exposure of Ouina’s body, revealing she was left with “one poor blanket, a girdle around my body” as “[t]hey wound my long hair around the hemlock tree” (17). Positioning readers as observers of the spectacle of the young woman bound and exposed, it highlights the violence performed against the body as Ouina reports that at that moment “nineteen arrows pierced my form.” The closing detail that a warrior who had been among the twenty selected to kill Ouina instead “sprang into the flames perishing with me” further dramatizes the account for readers by hinting at ill-fated romantic intrigue.

Ouina’s narrative in *Ouina’s Canoe* and Barrett’s retelling of it in his chapter both go on to note that the destruction of Ouina’s community occurs quickly thereafter as a result of a series of attacks by neighboring tribes as well as illness and famine. However, unlike the messages Conant printed in the *Banner of Light*, the tales Scott relayed devote little attention to the decimation of the community, other than to note that it happened as Ouina had foretold. In fact, her vision that the “pale faced warriors” would cause her tribe’s destruction appears to have been forgotten by this point, as both *Ouina’s Canoe* and the version told in Barrett’s chapter attribute the attacks on the tribe to their “old time enemies,” the Kanaweh tribe, rather than to European colonizers (Barrett 92). Barrett’s chapter then moves on to describe Ouina’s work in the afterlife as a spirit guide, where

she instructs wayward spirits on exhibiting “purity and goodness” and pens verse that is “the envy of poets and scholars”; *Ouina’s Canoe* closes with one of these poems (96, 100). With such a sentimental conclusion to the narrative of Scott’s spectral guide’s “earthly life,” readers are left with the image of the Native American spirit’s calm acceptance of her death and the fated annihilation of her community, and even the impression that the productivity of their afterlives will offset their destruction.

Amy Lehman observes that Cora Scott became a professional medium at the relatively young age of 15, which also happens to be the age at which Ouina had her fateful vision, according to the account Scott relays (131). Such a parallel in the life experiences of the medium and her spirit guide was no coincidence: for Scott’s patrons and readers, it signified the medium’s affinity with her otherworldly guide. Although Tromp argues that the “process of identification between medium and spirit dislocated the boundaries between English and nonwhite womanhood,” Ouina’s materializations and messages clearly had the opposite effect, instead shifting Spiritualists’ attention from Scott to the nonwhite body (78). With performances and publications like *Ouina’s Canoe* fetishizing her spectral guide throughout the narratives, the messages Scott relayed commoditized men and women of color under the guise of promoting Spiritualist beliefs and garnering support for Native American rights.

Like Conant’s performances and those by other mediums, Scott’s conjuring of non-white spirits served as a means of rendering the darkest aspects of American history into gothic tales. While they were perhaps less graphic than those published by her male colleagues, they generated similar effects by sensationalizing the accounts of racial and

colonial violence. Conant's and Scott's publications therefore prompted sympathy for those affected by this violence, but in the process figured readers as voyeuristic consumers of the harrowing accounts. By facilitating their publication, these mediums thus ensured the wide circulation of narratives that continually reinscribed racist and imperialist notions about African-Americans and Native Americans.

Chapter Three

Spectral Labor: Women's Spirit Photography and Constructions of Material Culture

Two weeks after announcing the development of the first spirit photograph in England in March of 1872, Georgiana Houghton conferred with the photographer of the image, Frederick Hudson, and the famed medium Mrs. Guppy regarding their difficulties in obtaining subsequent spirit images. Houghton recalls in her memoir, "I was told by my spirit friends that we were to have a séance for the purpose of receiving some directions as to the photographs.... Raps were immediately heard, and the following message was spelled out: 'Next Thursday you shall have a glorious spirit-photograph'" (*Chronicles* 9). She spent the next week preparing for the extraordinary sitting while being "much visited by my spirit friends," and constructed a lens cap based on their advice (10). The day the spirits had selected initially appeared ill-suited for a successful photography session despite the violent weather that seemed to invite ghostly manifestations, yet as Houghton narrates, they proceeded nonetheless:

When the Thursday arrived (March 28), it proved terribly stormy, both with wind and rain, but Mrs. Guppy and I bravely faced the weather, and went over at the appointed time, and I took with me the cap I had made for the lens.... Mrs. Guppy sat down in the cabinet, where I mesmerised her until she passed into complete trance.... As Mr. Hudson covered the lens after taking the photograph, three branches of [a] willow palm fell into my lap, which I placed on the table, and then went into the dark room to see the result, and on the plate the three branches of palm seem to radiate from my head like a crown. (12)

Houghton's retelling of the event is notable not only for the level of detail she provides in depicting the preparation for the sitting, but also for her portrayal of the

photography session as a collaboration among her, Hudson, Guppy and the spirits. The key role Guppy's and her own mediumship played in producing spirit photographs contradicted Spiritualist publications on the subject that characterized the process of obtaining these images as a solitary endeavor undertaken by a male spirit photographer. Yet her deliberate exclusion of any details related to the technical production of spirit forms on photographic plates tallies with Spiritualists' insistence that such labor remained hidden from human sight, as the spirits performed the work of rendering themselves visible on film. Spirit photographs, they argued, recorded these visitations and thereby visually demonstrated what scientists had deemed imaginary but were in fact only invisible. While Spiritualists' denial that humans performed the labor of displaying spirit bodies in these images is unsurprising, their explanation for the manner in which they were produced obscured women's involvement in this process.

Women mediums including Houghton as well as Hannah Mumler and Ada Emma Deane performed a variety of tasks in creating and distributing spirit photographs, and played a fundamental role in the studio from the moment of spirit photography's inception. Each of these women performed the affective labor that made spirit photography possible, establishing otherworldly communications as well as professional networks among photographers and often other mediums. Accounts of their work reveal that this form of labor figured as importantly in the photography studio as in the séance room, as the medium's presence inspired the spirits to display themselves on film, thereby providing sitters with a connection to those they mourned. While feminist scholars have assessed the ways affective labor, through its association with the domestic

sphere, has historically been undervalued in capitalist economies, mediums rendered the effects of their work profitable through their circulation of images publicized as evidence of immaterial beings. The gendered nature of their labor, however, divorced their work as mediums from a capitalist economy; paradoxically, it was their seeming lack of material labor that generated their success.

Disavowing mediums' technical labor in manufacturing the images and attributing such work to spirits suggested to viewers that spirit photography produced a direct visual representation of specters' presence. Spirit photography therefore appeared to bypass the process of mechanical reproduction Walter Benjamin later theorized as destroying the aura of the original, affirming its potential to in effect reinvest these portraits with authenticity. Contemporary critics of Spiritualism, of course, issued statements and even entire manuals on how this decidedly human task could be performed. Walter Woodbury's *Photographic Amusements*, first published in 1896, explains that for photographers using the wet collodion process as was customary until the 1880s, there were several options for producing such illusions, including making a double exposure by reusing the photographic residue from an earlier negative (5). Although Woodbury dismisses the work involved as fairly simple, the technical expertise necessary for successfully doctoring a spirit photograph using wet collodion, which historian John Hannavy describes as "the most difficult and cumbersome of all the Victorian processes to manipulate," demanded photographers' considerable knowledge, time and labor (36). Hannavy explains that preparing the plates used in the collodion process, which the first spirit photographers employed to produce their albumen prints,

was so labor-intensive that they needed at least one assistant in order to take the photograph in a timely manner (39, 43). Acting as such an assistant to Hudson, Houghton performed a critical function by posing sitters and helping them maintain these positions over an extended time as well as working with chemicals such as silver nitrate and sodium chloride to sensitize the plates. To effect the double exposure responsible for the appearance of the spirit image, Houghton would have needed to sensitize the plates multiple times, making spirit photography even more labor-intensive than traditional portraiture.

As a spirit photographer who was in turn assisted by several of her Spiritualist friends, Deane similarly performed a multitude of laborious tasks to produce her gelatin silver images. While the gelatin process presented the advantage that artificial light could be used to develop the prints, as Hannavy explains, it also potentially exposed photographers to the fumes of artificial gas lighting or even the danger of electric shock (121). Deane's doubly-demanding physical and technical labor in developing spirit images was also compounded by her use of spirit photography as a form of artwork. Creating images she categorized as spirit photographs but which contained indistinct forms, Deane modified photography from being a method with which to visually record the natural world to its having an artistic function. Deane claimed that her images reflected her and her patrons' thoughts, thus expanding Spiritualists' definition of spirit photography to include psychic visions while at the same time figuring it as a technology that entailed patrons' and other viewers' interpretation. Deane's photography therefore indicates the multifarious ways female medium-photographers shaped this field, for she

contended that her work not only exhibited specters, but also represented content she generated and projected onto film.

Yet despite these women's various roles in the photography studio, scholars have persisted in highlighting men's contributions to spirit photography without critically assessing the multiple modes of labor mediums performed alongside or independent of them. In attending to their role conjuring spirit matter while sitting for the camera, historians including Karen Beckman and Tom Gunning have proposed that photographic technology and the spectacular forms mediums produced overshadowed these women. However, this analysis neglects the complexity of mediums' involvement in such sittings, and instead reinforces notions of women's passivity and invisibility. Although these women and their male colleagues portrayed their mediumship as requiring a passive form of labor, it is important for us to read this in the context of the constraints placed on them by the nature of their employment. The successful display of their conjuring abilities in summoning spirits and hence inspiring Spiritualist believers required that these women conceal their participation in manufacturing the images. In spite of their attribution of their work to the spirits, chronicles of the women's careers expose their affective, aesthetic and technical labor in the studio to develop the unique photographs. That the complexity of their engagement in spirit photography continues to be overlooked suggests that they succeeded only too well in affirming the authenticity of the portraits. Nevertheless, each significantly shaped cultural understandings of spirit photography and its relationship to technology, visual culture and paranormal research, and their labor – both visible and unseen – remains essential to this history.

Hannah Mumler's Mediumship and the Origins of Spirit Photography

Developing the world's first spirit photograph in 1862, William Mumler circulated images that became a focus of Spiritualist publications for decades to come, generating substantial interest in the movement. Initially trained as a jeweler's engraver, Mumler claimed to have produced this portrait by accident while working as an amateur photographer at a studio in Boston. Uncertain as to how the pale image of a young girl came to appear beside him in his self-portrait, he passed the photograph along to a friend, who distributed it to several Spiritualist journals. A few months later, Mumler's image was the subject of numerous articles in these journals as well as mainstream tabloids; *The Photographic News*, for example, proclaimed in 1863: "Considerable interest is at present excited in certain circles in America by the alleged production of photographic portraits of disembodied spirits!" ("Spirit Photographs" 4). Such fascination seemed to evolve into a national and even international sensation as Spiritualists promoted the portraits as evidence of spirit manifestations. In the wake of this publicity, Mumler left the engraving business for a full-time position at the Boston photography studio and began charging clients ten dollars per sitting – more than forty times the average rate for a traditional photograph. Even at this exorbitant price, Mumler attracted so many clients that he moved with his wife to New York, where he established a spirit photography business in 1869 (Chéroux 20-21). His development of spirit photographs during an era in which objects such as postmortem photographs "were central to mourning practices" likely contributed to his considerable success (Cadwallader 14).

The fame attending such success, however, also elicited a police investigation into claims of Mumler's fraudulent business dealings. Initiated by New York City Mayor A. Oakley Hall, the enquiry culminated in a sensational trial that lasted three weeks and generated international press coverage. Although only a preliminary hearing to determine whether Mumler's case should be presented to a grand jury, both the prosecution and defense were led by eminent attorneys, who called numerous witnesses before a courtroom packed with journalists and public spectators. In their argument that Mumler had played no part in doctoring the images, the defense built their case around Spiritualists' claim that the spirits presented themselves on his portraits by means of supernatural agency (Leja 29). This strategy proved successful, with the judge reluctantly dismissing the case based on a lack of evidence despite his "moral convic[tion] that there had been trick and deception" in the production of the photographs. While the charges of fraudulence were so damaging to Mumler's reputation that he found it necessary to move his business back to Boston, he continued to be credited in the Spiritualist press for inspiring spectral appearances long after he quit the photography business in 1879 (Chéroux 22-23). Despite their attribution of these images to the spirits who appeared in them, Spiritualists regarded Mumler as the sole person responsible for creating the opportunity for the specters to do so.

Hannah Mumler's collaboration with her husband throughout this time, however, illustrates how women's channeling of spirits within the photography studio was central to the successful development of these images. Mumler's reliance upon his wife in addition to other prominent mediums is evident in his numerous descriptions of their

involvement in producing his photographs. Crediting Hannah with “wonderful *magnetic powers*,” he professed, “I believe them to be directly connected with spirit-photography, and to them I am largely indebted for my ability in taking the likenesses of those who have passed on; also for my first development” (qtd. in Kaplan 107-8). Hannah had a direct role in ensuring his commercial success, working as a mesmeric healer in their community and likely referring her clients to him, for her clinic adjoined his studio within their home. During his trial, several witnesses for the prosecution attested to her close involvement in the business in a secretarial capacity, while Mumler and his supporters praised her powers as a medium (Tucker 75; Kaplan 107-8). Several of Mumler’s patrons publicly affirmed her primary role in the photography studio as a medium who channeled and predicted the appearance of specters in photographs. In one instance, Bronson Murray wrote a letter to the *Banner of Light* in 1873 recounting how Hannah had revealed just prior to his sitting that “when my photograph should be taken by Mr. Mumler, there would appear on the plate with me the figure of an anxious wife, holding in her hand an anchor composed of flowers, who was seeking to impress her husband of her existence.” Hannah Mumler’s clairvoyance was confirmed, Murray avows, after her husband developed the photograph and “the female figure with the anchor and the letters composed of flower-buds, appeared as promised” (qtd. in Kaplan 122). While Spiritualists and Mumler himself portrayed his own mediumistic skills as necessary to obtaining his spirit images, it is evident Hannah Mumler was as crucial to the production of spirit photographs as her husband was.

Mumler's patrons consisted primarily of mourners, many of whom sought to acquire images of deceased loved ones, and his autobiography indicates he frequently relied upon his wife to conjure these spirits. On one occasion in particular, Mumler explains it was Hannah's presence that finally generated a successful spirit photograph after several failed attempts. Moses Dow, an eminent magazine editor whose testimony Mumler included in his memoirs, discloses that he sought to assuage his profound grief over the death of an assistant editor and close friend by visiting mediums to contact her. One of the mediums referred Dow to Mumler's services soon after, advising Dow that he might obtain a spirit photograph of his friend Mabel. Although Dow was disappointed by Mumler's initial lack of success in obtaining such an image, he relates that these circumstances suddenly changed when Hannah entered the room on the third attempt. Dow narrates his conversation with her: "She looked as if she was under spiritual influence. I asked her – "Do you see any spirits present?" "Yes," said she; "I see a beautiful spirit"; and immediately she was entranced, and under the control of Mabel" (104,106). Moments later, William Mumler emerged from the developing room with a photographic plate bearing the image of Mabel's spirit standing to the side of Dow (Figure 3.1). Although the widely-circulated photograph was attributed to Mumler in collections of his work, Dow's description of Hannah's involvement at this pivotal moment indicates her mediumship figured importantly in the production of Mumler's photographs.

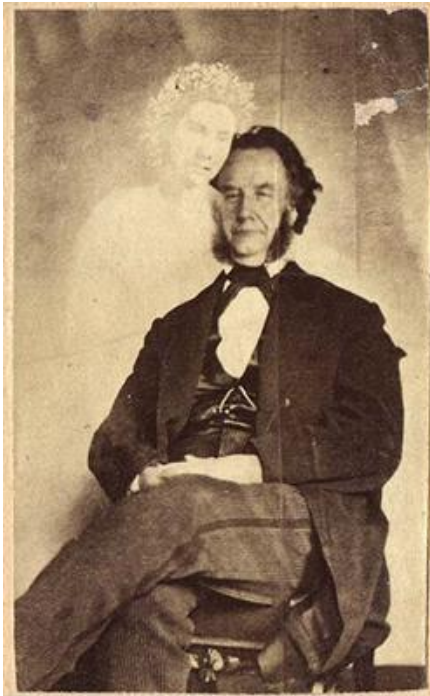


Fig. 3.1. Dow accompanied by the spectral image of Mabel. William H. Mumler, “Moses A. Dow and the Spirit of Mabel Warren,” c. 1871. (Reproduced by kind permission of the College of Psychic Studies.)

Hannah Mumler’s collaboration with her husband at this key moment demonstrates the considerable effect her presence had during spirit photography sessions, as she appeared to provide the sitter a moment of spiritual contact with his bereaved friend. Her efforts to establish the communication uniting these friends strengthened Dow’s investment in Spiritualism, which he conveyed to his readers. Dow asserts that the photograph of Mabel not only confirmed the authenticity of spirit photography, but also reaffirmed his belief in a spiritual afterlife and ““assures me that we have our friends about us”” (107). Hannah’s participation in the photography session allowed Dow to engage in a conversation with Mabel’s spirit through Hannah in which Mabel described the photograph that would momentarily result from Hannah’s mediumship. Slipping into and out of her mesmeric trance within the space of only a few minutes, Hannah’s ability to communicate with the spirit of a woman Dow describes as akin to a ““dearly-beloved

daughter” whose death seemed to create “a vacuum . . . which could not be again filled” led Dow to find comfort in the resulting image (97). Her mediumship during the photography sitting also infused the photograph with meaning for Dow, as he interpreted it as validation of his previous consultations with another medium, in which Mabel had announced she would appear during his appointment with Mumler. As a result of her keeping her promise, Dow pronounces that the photograph “also proves the truth of all that Mabel has told me in her communications, as she has sealed the document with her honest and truthful face” (107). His statement signals the impact of Hannah Mumler’s affective labor in the studio as the image developed, where her concomitant trances inspired patrons’ confidence in the spirit photographer and his ability to capture images of departed friends.

In providing Dow with a lasting image of this moment of contact with the spirit of his beloved friend, Hannah Mumler simultaneously gave Dow a measure of solace and ensured her husband’s commercial success. The well-known editor declared in his narrative of the experience that he was “*perfectly satisfied*” with the spirit photographer and openly supported Mumler throughout his trial (106, emphasis Dow’s). Allowing Mumler to publish his account within Mumler’s personal narrative, Dow acknowledged he was motivated to recount his experiences by his desire that he “may give encouragement and increase the confidence of those whose minds have not yet become settled on the subject” and to demonstrate Mumler’s genuine abilities as a spirit photographer (96). His defense of Mumler also highlights the photographer’s close working relationship with his wife. At Dow’s next visit to the medium Mrs. Hardy, she

expressed her hope that he would obtain a larger version of the spirit photograph, as his was very small, and explained that he should do so ““while the conditions were favorable.”” Dow later reflects upon her advice, musing, ““I suppose if Mr. or Mrs. Mumler should die, the conditions would be changed, for I think the combination of magnetism is the source of the remarkable power which they have of taking this kind of pictures”” (106). Although Hannah Mumler’s contributions to her husband’s immensely successful spirit photography business were for the most part overshadowed by his supporters’ portrayal of his work as independently produced, Dow’s narrative undermines their emphasis on his solitary labor and affirms her central role in her husband’s business as well as in the emergence of spirit photography.

Indeed, while Mumler downplayed his wife’s role in his photography business during his trial for fraud, likely in an attempt to protect her from prosecution, Hannah Mumler’s own renown in their community as a mesmeric physician was integral to her husband’s professional success (178). Like many mesmeric healers, she treated her patients in her home; as a ““natural clairvoyant for diagnosing and treating disease,”” she performed examinations on her patients while entranced and under the guidance of her spirit control, the former physician and abolitionist Dr. Benjamin Rush¹³ (107). Mumler explains that she turned her previously free healing clinic into a profitable business when he began taking professional spirit photographs. Their respective businesses were separated only by a door between her examination room and the studio he set up in their

¹³ Hannah Mumler’s channeling of Benjamin Rush (1746-1813), the president of the first abolitionist society in America, illustrates Spiritualists’ connections to the abolitionist movement; see D’Elia for a detailed history of Rush’s involvement in the abolitionist movement.

parlor, where the two could consult each other easily and Hannah could inform her husband when she felt ready to sit for a photograph. On one such occasion, her possession by Dr. Rush led to a photograph that served as an important piece of evidence demonstrating her husband's gift. Relating in his narrative that he had waited several years for Rush to appear in one of his photographs, Mumler recounts how his wife suddenly channeled Rush during one of her mesmeric examinations of a patient and notified her husband that she was ready to be photographed. The ensuing portrait of Mrs. Mumler and the spectral image of Rush was displayed in the Mumlers' parlor, where a patron later recognized the form as the deceased physician's, thereby confirming Mumler's ability to capture conjured ghosts on film (108-9). Seamlessly uniting her occupation as a non-traditional healer with her photographic mediumship, Hannah returned to her room minutes after Rush's spectral appearance, and according to William, "continued the examination as though nothing had happened" (109). Through her own profession as a mesmeric healer as well as her collaborative work with her husband in the photography studio, Hannah not only transformed their private home into a site of commercial production, but also configured their marriage as a business partnership. Although William received credit in the press for his invention of spirit photography, it is evident that Hannah expanded her opportunities for her employment and involvement in Spiritualism through their collaboration.

Eyewitness testimonies by the Mumlers' patrons which recount Hannah's continuous participation in the day-to-day functioning of the studio further demonstrate her crucial role in her husband's photography business. One client, William W. Silver,

avers, ““Her duties were in the reception room, which was on the first floor, below the photographic room. She received the orders, and sent them upstairs. . . . She received the customers, took their names, and sent them upstairs. She sometimes came up in the operating room”” (178). Mr. Elbridge Gerry, the prosecutor representing the case against Mumler, cites the testimony of Mumler’s assistant William Guay, which corroborated Silver’s statement; Guay affirmed Hannah Mumler ““was always present”” at the photography studio. Gerry concludes from this evidence that ““Mumler trusted *her*, if he did not trust any one else”” (176). Although Gerry’s allegations that the Mumlers had committed fraud in earning money for these photographs threatened to severely damage their reputations and diminish their profits, the prosecutor’s case nonetheless attributes their success to Hannah’s business acumen as much as to William’s. Indeed, Gerry charged that Hannah was ““a *particeps criminis* in the matter”” even though she was never formally charged with fraud herself. According to Gerry, ““Mrs. Mumler’s aid was valuable . . . to distract attention by raps”” and thereby prevent sitters from discovering the Mumlers’ trickery (178). Attracting customers for her husband’s business from her own client base as a mesmeric healer as well as maintaining them through her performance of mediumistic powers, Hannah Mumler was instrumental in preserving both their patrons’ belief in spirit photography and her husband’s profits.

It is through her work that Hannah demonstrates the impact of female mediums’ affective labor on the success of spirit photography and the Spiritualist movement as a whole, as she and other women who claimed to channel spirits sustained patrons’ deeply-felt connection to the spiritual beyond. Mumler describes his wife as a ““perfect battery in

herself” (108) to praise her mesmeric powers facilitating this communication; his statement reflects contemporary Spiritualist doctrine that, according to Jeffrey Sconce, “link[ed] electromagnetism and femininity in a divine alliance” (47).¹⁴ However, unlike many of the texts Sconce considers which portray women’s mediumship as a form of passive receptivity, William Mumler draws attention to the productive nature of his wife’s work. Mumler explains that as a mesmeric healer, she supplied the “wonderful, life-giving principle of animal magnetism” when “placing her hands upon the head of a patient, [and] the subtle current is felt distinctly coursing through every tissue of the body” (qtd. in Kaplan 108). His account likewise underscores the ways Hannah’s sensitivity actively established the conditions possible for spirit materializations within the photography studio, and thereby produced material objects that made visible the emotional connection among sitters and photographed spirits. Hannah’s acclaimed skills as a medium therefore resulted in what believers interpreted as comforting evidence of spirits’ enduring presence after death, and were a vital component in her family’s commercial success.

Similarly, Hannah Mumler drew public attention to her husband’s business and wider Spiritualist practices by channeling the spirits of renowned figures. William Mumler documents several well-known clients’ communication with spirits of their loved ones through Hannah’s mediumship, offering their emotional responses to this contact as verification of his wife’s ability to conjure spirits recognizable to their loved ones. In one such account, Abraham Lincoln’s widow, a fervent believer in Spiritualism throughout

¹⁴ Noakes (“Instruments”) and Galvan also assess Spiritualist constructions of the relationship between female mediumship and instrumentality, as I discuss in Chapter 5.

her husband's presidency, visited Mumler's studio in 1872 in the hopes of obtaining a spirit photograph.¹⁵ However, Mrs. Lincoln disguised herself throughout the photography session and later when picking up her prints as a test of Mumler's credibility. As Mrs. Lincoln viewed the photograph, Mumler reports, she hesitantly responded in the affirmative to a friend who asked at the studio whether she recognized the spirit image on it (Figure 3.2). Hannah, who was standing nearby, "was almost instantly entranced," and Mrs. Lincoln's son Thaddeus spoke through Hannah to confirm that his father appeared in the image. "A long conversation" followed, after which Hannah was in turn possessed by Abraham Lincoln as he conversed with his widow. Hannah's possession was verified, Mumler explains, by her friend at the studio who witnessed "this excellent test" (92-3). Her performance of falling into a trance thus served to negate the possibility that the Mumlers were merely exploiting Mrs. Lincoln's fame, assuring this eminent client of the authenticity of the portrait.



Fig. 3.2. Spirit photograph of Mrs. Lincoln surrounded by the apparitional forms of her son and her husband. William H. Mumler, "Mary Todd Lincoln with the Spirit of Her Husband, President Abraham Lincoln," 1870-75. (Reproduced by kind permission of the College of Psychic Studies).

¹⁵ For an assessment of Mary Todd Lincoln's association with the Spiritualist movement, see Bennett.

Hannah Mumler's supernormal recognition of Mrs. Lincoln's late son and husband in the photo inspired her channeling of messages from the dead that appeared to substantiate both her own mediumistic sensitivity and her husband's gift as a spirit photographer. As a result of the exchange, William reveals that Mrs. Lincoln "'we[pt] tears of joy that she had again found her loved ones'" and had obtained proof of their spiritual existence (93). Hannah's conjuring also took place at a critical moment, as Mrs. Lincoln's public affirmation that this was a genuine spirit photograph hinged upon her ability to recognize the spirit forms in the image.¹⁶ Attentive to her client's hesitation, Hannah responded by displaying her powers to communicate with the dead, dispelling any doubts Mrs. Lincoln may have had concerning the identity of the materialized forms. Her mediumship transformed an object that would otherwise have only shown unrecognizable ghostly forms into an image signaling a moment of communication with Mrs. Lincoln's lost loved ones. As the image circulated throughout Spiritualist circles and the press, it also came to memorialize Lincoln in the decade after he presided over the most painful rift in American history. While conveying Mrs. Lincoln's private loss, the product of Hannah's work during the sitting also serves as an emblem of the nation's collective grief. Hannah's mediumistic performance in her husband's photography studio thus signifies spirit photography's contributions to nineteenth-century mourning culture as well as to the complex reestablishment of American national identity during the Reconstruction era.

¹⁶ Tucker explains that although sitters could not always identify the spirit forms appearing beside them in photographs, Spiritualists frequently relied upon sitters' and mediums' recognition of these "extras" to dispute claims of spirit photographers' fraudulence (76).

Despite Mrs. Lincoln's appreciation of Hannah's skills, they remain under-acknowledged in accounts of Mumler's contributions to spirit photography. James Coates' oft-cited *Photographing the Invisible*, published in 1911, exemplifies the ways subsequent histories of spirit photography obscure the participation in this process by women such as Hannah Mumler. In Coates' rendition of Mrs. Lincoln's experience at Mumler's studio, Hannah is not even mentioned, let alone given credit for her timely and persuasive display of her capabilities as a medium. To effect this exclusion of her contributions from the historical record, Coates attributes the recognition of the spirit image to Mumler himself, who – contrary to his own account – immediately “recognised the spirit as that of the late President” upon initially taking the photograph. Likewise, Mrs. Lincoln appears to have had no need for Hannah's mediumistic intervention, as Coates reports that she, too, was instantly convinced that the photograph bore Lincoln's image and subsequently revealed her identity as his widow (9). By rewriting these events in such a way, Coates reinforces the narrative initially constructed by William Mumler and later by his contemporaries of Mumler's sole authorship of the photographs, neglecting Hannah's equally important role in reimagining the possibilities for the application of photographic technology. Even Mumler's portrayal of Hannah's involvement in his photography business betrays an ambivalence in crediting her for her work: although his 1875 autobiography attributes his success to her mediumship, his letter twelve years earlier to *The Herald of Progress* responding to the announcement of his first spirit photograph makes no mention of her involvement in this event. In contrast to his acknowledgement in his autobiography of Hannah's influence over his

photography through her mesmerism, he wrote in this letter that his first spirit photograph “was taken of myself, by myself, on Sunday, when there was not a living soul in the room beside me” (“Spirit Photographs” 4).

In spite of William’s later disclosure in his memoirs of his reliance upon his wife for her conjuring of spirits appearing in his photographs, Spiritualist writers who recounted the history of spirit photography to their late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readers, including J. Traill Taylor and Andrew Glendinning, similarly overlook Hannah’s contributions. Each point to William as solely responsible for the discovery of spirit images, lauding his achievements as a medium who visibly demonstrated the existence of spirits. Such a perspective continues to inform recent scholarship by historians such as Clément Chéroux and Martyn Jolly who assess William Mumler’s work in the studio, for the only written record of Hannah’s involvement appears in her husband’s autobiography, where her voice is mediated through his interpretation of events. Yet it is clear from his memoirs and the proceedings of his trial, both of which form the most comprehensive account of the origins of spirit photography, that Hannah shaped the Spiritualist movement in myriad and significant ways, working alongside her husband to produce and circulate images of materialized spirit forms that continue to draw attention. Although she was compelled to conceal the ways she contributed to her husband’s success through her professional ingenuity and her convincing performances of being entranced, her collaborative work with her husband demonstrates that our understanding of the history of spirit photography is incomplete without our

consideration of the multiple and frequently hidden forms of labor mediums contributed to it.

**“I Carr[ied] Out an Optical Arrangement for Spirit Photography”:
Georgiana Houghton as the First Female Medium-Photographer**

During the decade after the reports surfaced about Mumler’s first spirit portrait, several other mediums across America and Britain began their own sittings with spirit photographers, including Georgiana Houghton, a medium in London, who collaborated with the photographer Frederick A. Hudson. Houghton announced Hudson’s success in obtaining images of spectral beings in 1872, publicizing the production of the first spirit photograph in England (*Chronicles* 1). Although newspapers and the Spiritualist press credited Hudson for the photograph, Houghton complicates this attribution by explaining in her memoir, *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye*, that the famed London medium Agnes Guppy and her husband, Samuel, were involved in producing the image and were privy to the spirits’ earlier declaration to Hudson that they would appear (1-2). Despite not being present at the first successful sitting, Houghton soon became integral to Hudson’s spirit photography business, frequently taking part in spirit photography sittings with him and Mrs. Guppy. During these sessions, Houghton found herself behind the camera as often as she was in front of it: the photography skills she had developed prior to her attempts to photograph spirits allowed her to manipulate the camera and develop images alongside Hudson. As a result of her expertise both in mesmerism and photography, Houghton not

only played a key role in inspiring spirits to appear in photographs, but she in effect replaced Hudson as she came to guide the photography sessions.

Although her dual function as a medium and photographer accorded with Spiritualist theories that spirit photographers were gifted at inspiring specters to appear on film, Houghton's authoritative position in the photography studio was unusual for women during the nineteenth century. Cornelius Jabez Hughes estimated in an 1873 article for the *London Photographic News* that women then comprised one-third of photographers' assistants, and he proposed that this number would soar, but these positions were usually regarded as suitable for working-class women and restricted women's roles to coloring in, cutting and mounting photographs (Hughes 35; Marien 161). Houghton's ability to single-handedly manipulate the camera and produce photographs thus provided her with significantly more control over the photographic process than that afforded to photographers' assistants. Her training in photography also differed from the instruction other amateur women photographers received. Men dominated the field of photography at the time, and women who became involved in amateur photography usually belonged to the middle or upper classes and were trained informally, learning from husbands or male relatives (Marien 157, 161). As her father was a merchant and she never married, however, Houghton appeared to have taken a different route in acquiring this skill. She reports that in 1856 and 1857, when she was in her early forties, she "carried on with much interest some amateur photography, so that [she was] practically conversant with the various details" (*Chronicles* 11). Such an interest inspired her to learn about the theories of photography, as she also notes her

method of producing portraits was informed by her reading of scientific journals on photography. While it is likely that her work beginning in 1871 as Hudson's assistant served as an apprenticeship for her, Houghton evidently was already well-versed in the use of this technology.

Houghton's account of her experiences as a spirit photographer reveals the degree to which she modified photographic practices in her work with Guppy and Hudson. Her descriptions of her work demonstrate her extensive knowledge about photographic instruments as well as her familiarity with the most current theories about the technology; she describes adapting her technique on one occasion based on her reading of the *British Journal of Photography*. After successfully obtaining a spirit image, a result she attributes to following the advice in one article to use a new camera and plates for sittings, she describes feeling so confident that she "felt further induced to carry out an optical arrangement for spirit photography." Houghton explains that by combining her technological proficiency with her mediumistic skills, she even "astonished" Mr. Hudson with the quality of the spirit image she obtained:

"[K]nowing, as most scientific men do, that the invisible end of the spectrum is the most active chemically, I resolved to exemplify to sceptics that with such an instrument as I now had made, and would use, we could take portraits of the sitters.... Mr. Hudson... f[ound] not only a sharp, well-defined negative, with good half-tone, but also standing by the lady was a fine spirit figure, draped in black and white." (17)

Houghton affirms here a necessarily close relationship between science and Spiritualism, where fine-tuning her technical instruments in accordance with established scientific principles and theories of best photographic practices allowed her to make spirits visible on photographs.

By demonstrating her scientific knowledge and technical expertise, Houghton extended the work of many Spiritualists who sought to align their activities with scientific investigations into the natural world.¹⁷ However, her command of the scientific literature on photographic processing as well as over the photography studio itself undermined gendered divisions of knowledge and appropriate forms of work. Houghton's multiple publications on her experiences as a spirit photographer and the distribution of her photographs ensured her images circulated much more widely than those of other female photographers. Her depiction of her labor in the studio also inverted gendered working relationships; as a result of her mediumistic and technical skills, she consistently directed Mr. Hudson during their attempts to capture spirits on film. Hudson comes across in Houghton's narrative as bumbling and clumsy, which Houghton attributes to his nervousness and sensitivity (113). She dismisses complaints about these traits interfering with Hudson's work, yet her clear authority in the photography studio indicates that the photographs he obtained were dependent upon her creative vision, scientific knowledge and technical skill as well as her ability to channel spirits and entrance Mrs. Guppy. According to Houghton, spirits arranged appointed times with her at which they would appear on film, and on several occasions she therefore assembled Mr. Hudson and Mrs. Guppy in the photography studio, provided a cap she had made for the lens which became crucial to obtaining a satisfactory image, and mesmerized Mrs. Guppy before sitting for the photograph herself (11-12). After coordinating the scene, Houghton quickly transitioned from her role as a mesmerist to that of a technician while she

¹⁷ See Noakes ("Spiritualism") and Oppenheim for their examination of psychical research conducted by scientists such as William Crookes and Oliver Lodge.

attended to the development of the plates. Throughout her description of one of these sittings, she rarely mentions Mr. Hudson despite his ownership of the studio; the moment he takes the photograph is overshadowed by Houghton's contact with the spirits as they moved her chair. Although Tom Gunning asserts that female mediums after the 1860s increasingly became the objects of the male gaze during scientific investigations and Spiritualist séances, and spirit photography "[look] over the medium's role," Houghton's narrative reveals the ways female mediums could in fact direct spirit photography sessions (52). Houghton therefore redefined the role women such as Hannah Mumler had performed in the photography studio to one that allowed for their active involvement but also necessitated their sensitivity to channel spirits.

Houghton produced spirit paintings in the years before she began taking spectral photographs, where, as she explained, her spirit controls guided her creation of watercolors.¹⁸ These paintings, like her photographs, served to represent the otherwise invisible: channeling visions from her spirit guides, Houghton transferred them onto paper in vivid watercolors (Harvey 107). Although John Harvey argues that the invention of spirit photography effectively replaced automatic drawing and writing (110), Houghton's and other spirit mediums' artwork shaped their interpretation and presentation of the images later developed with the use of new photographic technologies. Both forms of media engage the Victorians' fascination with the visual in attempting to display both the supernatural as well as the effects of mediums' possession by spirits, yet they also challenge the limitations of accurately representing unseen forces.

¹⁸ See Oberter for an analysis of Houghton's watercolor spirit paintings and their engagement with abstract art and Christian theology.

Houghton's photography built upon her objective to convey that the images "contained an inner meaning as well as an external semblance" (*Evenings* 54). Her statement suggests she repurposed photography to visually portray intangible content, in the process uniting the aesthetic qualities of spirit paintings with the camera's ability to achieve verisimilitude so as to provide viewers with greater insight into the spirit world. Her contention that it was the spirits who formed these images, either by guiding her hand while painting or materializing on film, elides her own aesthetic production of them so as to affirm their authenticity. In spite of her obligatory disavowal of her own artistic talent and labor, however, Houghton's spirit images testify to her efforts to create portraits with an aesthetic as well as a spiritual function.¹⁹

Houghton's work broadened the potential of this media technology so that it not only illuminated otherwise unseen spirits, but also indirectly represented networks among mediums, spirits and sitters. While feminist critics have observed how affective labor has been dissociated from material production and hence often obscured, Houghton's spirit photographs make a point of displaying her mediation of the emotional bonds that rendered her circulation of spectral images possible. One of her photographs showing her with the spectral image of a woman draped in cloths portrays what she and fellow medium Mrs. Tebb interpreted as the spirit of Houghton's beloved sister, whose death in

¹⁹ Houghton's paintings also extended the work of contemporary amateur photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron, who experimented with potential uses of photography by depicting imaginative portraits representing her friends and family posed as famous biblical, mythological and literary scenes. Cameron explained that she sought to portray these scenes to "ennoble photography and secure for it the character and uses of High Art by combining the real and ideal and sacrificing nothing of Truth" (qtd. in Marien 158). According to Allen Grove, who examines Cameron's adaptation of photography for artistic purposes, "For Cameron the camera does not reveal an unexpected truth; rather, it is a tool that can be used to create a fictional air for her subjects" (151).

1851 inspired Houghton's Spiritualist beliefs (Figure 3.3; Tucker 84). Epitomizing the type of connection with the departed that attracted so many patrons who hoped to contact their lost loved ones, the photograph exhibits a moment of communication between Houghton and the spectral form; according to Houghton, "we are standing face to face, her right hand is within mine" (*Chronicles* 25). Mrs. Tebb reads what appears as a lightly-shaded line running diagonally from the shrouded figure to Houghton's shoulder as "a ray of coloured light, flowing from her to you; ... it is the link binding you to each other; it flows from the heart.... She is one with whom you are strongly knit, and it seems ... as if there were some other peculiar bond, for which she feels especial gratitude and love" (25-6). Upon this assessment, Tebb and Houghton determine the figure to be Houghton's sister Zilla, whom Houghton notes she had expected to appear that day as she had "so strongly and often felt the signals of herself" while Houghton was preparing to sit for the photograph. In channeling her beloved sister for the image, Houghton expanded psychical researchers' construction of spirit photography as a means of verifying the existence of the paranormal, affirming its potential to also exhibit the deeply-felt emotional bonds that formed a central component of Spiritualist beliefs.



Fig. 3.3. Spirit photograph of Houghton communicating with the veiled form of her sister, Zilla, whose death motivated Houghton's Spiritualist faith.

For Houghton this image is a direct representation of the bonds uniting those separated by death; she remarks upon what she considers its most significant feature, “the togetherness of the spirit and the mortal:—in all the previous pictures, although on the same plate, they have seemed apart from one another, living separate existences, but here they are close as two loving sisters dwelling in one home” (27). Her interpretation of the image supports Spiritualists’ promotion of mediumship and photography as a means of bridging the distance between believers and the dead. Declaring her attachment to her sister to be the basis of their communication, Houghton contends that this photograph renders visible the spiritual connection she established as a result of her mediumship. Numerous other photographs Houghton produced exhibit her interest in emotional connections between female mediums and spirits; forms resembling shrouded women whom she identifies as family and friends she mourned appear in them. Even more compelling for Houghton than the materialization of the ghostly forms is the portraits’ expression of an otherworldly alliance among women. Exemplifying this investment is

the photograph of her surrounded by two female friends whose affinity with her was symbolized, Houghton claimed, by a band of blurred light. Joining hands with her friends as she had with her sister in their photograph, Houghton stages the image as visible evidence of the emotional bond among the women (Figure 3.4). Drawing attention to her own affective work in establishing these spiritual bonds, Houghton implies her successful production of photographs resulted from her shared labor with the spirits. Although never acknowledging the extent to which she manipulated the photographic equipment and chemicals to effect the appearance of specters, Houghton nonetheless framed her work as a joint production facilitated by her spiritual connection to the spectral women.

Houghton's descriptions of her portraits reveal how her citation of the spirits' labor allowed her to negotiate her role as both a professional photographer and spirit medium. She often portrayed her photographs as evidence that the spirits sanctioned her work in the studio, particularly in her narration of how she obtained a picture of her beloved aunt. This photograph, she writes, shows her standing directly in front of a shrouded figure, whom she recognized as her Aunt Helen (Figure 3.5). It was the appearance of her aunt's spirit that initially sustained Houghton during her development as a medium; Houghton discloses that her aunt's materialization in the photograph also came at a momentous time for her, when she first began producing spirit photographs with Hudson. Her aunt's presence not only indicated her spiritual guidance, Houghton explains, but also represented her pecuniary support of her niece. Readers discover here that Houghton had survived on her inheritance from her aunt and supported herself while producing Spiritualist paintings through these means. Thus, the photograph holds a



Fig. 3.4. Houghton and her friends with a band of light representing their emotional union.



Fig. 3.5. Houghton and the spirit form of her aunt, who was said to be “propping [Houghton] up.”

deeper significance for Houghton and her readers: Houghton reports that upon showing it to her sister's maid, the latter proclaimed, "'She seems as if she were propping you up'" as a result of the spectral form standing closely behind Houghton. Reminded of Helen's generosity at this moment, Houghton declares that the photograph is evidence of her aunt's continued support, for Helen "may be said to have pecuniarily *propped* me up ever since Mamma's death, and to be now desirous of doing so in this new work, as I was thus qualified in the following week to accept professional fees" for her photographs (37, emphasis Houghton's). Houghton's characterization of the photograph exemplifies her careful positioning of the spirits' role in her photography in relation to her own. By "pecuniarily propp[ing her] up" throughout her efforts to establish her career as a spirit photographer, Houghton associates her certification and success with her aunt's support rather than with her own desire for profit. Her statement therefore illustrates her negotiation of her professional status: although highlighting her qualifications might demonstrate her expertise as a commercial photographer, her legitimacy as a spirit medium depended upon her attribution of her portraits to spectral assistance.

In this and other accounts, Houghton emphasizes the gendered nature of her work, as her feminine sympathy is instrumental to her affective connection with the spirits. The instances when she calls attention to her technical work in the studio are tempered by her references to the embodied labor she performed in conjuring spirits for her portraits. She recalls her "spirit friends" informing her, for example, that the photographs depended on their "gathering the emanations from" her, noting, "this force is something *drawn* from me, and not merely the natural outflow" (10, 22). Such a description of the substance

used to facilitate spirits' appearance bears similarities to psychical researchers' later postulation that ectoplasm, a form of spirit matter, emerged from within the medium's body. Karen Beckman proposes that the production of ectoplasm resembled the labor of giving birth; Houghton's portrayal of spirits generating the photographs from her "emanations" similarly signifies this relationship. As Beckman explains, considering spectral materializations to be extruded from the spirit medium challenges our conceptions about the fixity of bodily boundaries (81, 86). Blurring the margin between her body and the substance forming her portraits, Houghton's description of her mediumship asserts a form of authorship of her work. Contrary to her embodied labor relegating her to a position of passivity in relation to the spirits as typified in Spiritualist assessments of mediumship, Houghton determined how her mediumistic "force" was visually produced and articulated through her direction of Hudson's photography studio. Unlike the mediums and psychical researchers who puzzled over ectoplasm, Houghton claimed the ability to both channel and interpret the content of her photographs, presenting her portraits in a way that fostered her professional success.

As Martyn Jolly explains, Houghton sold her spirit photographs she obtained from Hudson to her Spiritualist friends and clients, and supported her continued work as a photographer and medium with the profits (25). Through her collaboration with Hudson along with female spirit mediums, Houghton transformed her unpaid work as a spirit painter into an occupation that publicly displayed her combined mediumistic and technical expertise. By characterizing her portraits as jointly produced by her and the spirits, however, Houghton was able to guide her sittings and the development of these

images without fully revealing the technical and artistic labor she performed in manufacturing them. Her work illuminates how women medium-photographers challenged gendered professional restrictions with uneven results within the Spiritualist movement: affirming her gift in the photography studio came at the expense of disavowing the full extent of her labor.

Ada Emma Deane and the Collaborative Production of Spirits’ “Freakish Marks”

In the years following Houghton’s success as a medium-photographer in the 1870s and 1880s, several other women rose to prominence within this industry. Among them was Ada Emma Deane, a former charwoman whose business acuity and powers as a medium in many ways matched Houghton’s and Hannah Mumler’s. F.W. Warrick explains in his account of his work with Deane that she reported encountering supernatural phenomena at a young age; like Mumler and Houghton, she later heard and saw spirits as they gave directions to her for optimal photography opportunities and appeared next to her sitters (31, 39). And like Houghton, Deane was well-versed in the chemical and technical features of developing photographs; she often worked independently in the British College of Psychic Science, and even made a makeshift darkroom in her kitchen (Chéroux 76). Warrick and testimonies he includes from other Spiritualists attest to Deane’s adept handling of photographic plates and other machinery as she prepared the camera before channeling spectral beings. Her work problematizes the attribution of labor in the photographic process as Houghton’s does: because Spiritualists maintained that these photographs were produced by the spirits themselves,

Warrick and other associates of Deane's insisted that "invisible operator[s]" rather than Deane were responsible for the appearance of "freakish marks" on her images despite evidence that she had skillfully applied chemicals to them (31). As a result, Deane's spirit photography and mediumship underscored the double bind women faced in their work in the photography studio, since cultivating their professional status as authentic mediums necessitated that their technical and artistic expertise remain unacknowledged.

In widely distributing her spirit photographs and establishing a network of supporters which included prominent Spiritualists like Warrick, Arthur Conan Doyle and Sir Oliver Lodge, Deane quickly attracted international media attention, both favorable and critical. It was through her association with these powerful allies that Deane maintained a successful photography business until 1933, when she apparently decided on her own that she had exhausted her photographic capabilities and should explore other interests such as dog-breeding (Chéroux 77). Conan Doyle in particular wrote lengthy defenses of Deane's work, and in *The Case for Spirit Photography*, presents Deane as "a somewhat pathetic and forlorn figure among all these clever tricksters." Highlighting her attributes that evoked sympathy rather than distrust, Conan Doyle further describes Deane as "a little, elderly charwoman, a humble white mouse of a person, with her sad face, her frayed gloves, and her little handbag..." (60). Portraying Deane in a way that is characteristic of her supporters' emphasis on her advanced age and her relative impoverishment, Conan Doyle appeals to his readers' sympathy and trust in his depiction of Deane's background yet also obscures the paid labor she performed in producing spirit photographs. Implying Mrs. Deane had in no way profited from her skills and fame, he

juxtaposes her against organizations like the Society for Psychical Research, arguing that the authenticity of Deane's photographs was demonstrated by her lack of interest in the kind of pecuniary rewards underwriting the organization's research. Warrick also details Deane's lifelong financial struggles, indicating that her dedication to her work as a spirit photographer persisted in spite of, rather than being fostered by, this hardship.

Such descriptions conceal Deane's considerable entrepreneurial acumen, evidenced by her rapid rise to fame soon after beginning her work as a photographer, as well as her close association with the most eminent Spiritualists of her era. Although Deane received a considerable amount of negative press attention, which her supporters roundly and publicly denounced, her choice of subjects in her photographs suggests Deane certainly did not shy away from opportunities to publicize her work. One of her most controversial and widely-circulated spirit photographs taken of the Cenotaph on Armistice Day in 1924 received as much attention as it did largely because of the location of the photograph as well as the popular following Deane had amassed throughout the previous three years as a result of her establishing a tradition of photographing the annual Two Minutes' Silence commemorating the war dead. As Deane's close friend and frequent collaborator Estelle Stead, the niece of W. T. Stead, explains, she and Deane received guidance from the spirit of her uncle in 1921 that Deane should photograph this service, as the spirits of fifteen servicemen who had died in the First World War would make an appearance. The resulting photograph bore the images of the men along with a Native American Chief and was widely distributed throughout the Spiritualist community (Figure 3.6). With these instructions repeated to Estelle Stead before subsequent annual

Armistice Day events, Deane accordingly followed this spiritual advice and drew a significant amount of attention as a result (Jolly 125-128). By focusing the series of photographs on this national event, Deane ensured the public's interest in her work and in spirit photography itself. The growing media attention Deane and Stead had generated by distributing Deane's earlier photographs to the Spiritualist press was so intense at the time of the 1924 Cenotaph photograph, Stead recalled, that they "had hardly had time to develop the plates, before I was rung up on the telephone by various papers, begging for news" (40). Directly engaging the national mourning in the decade after the Great War, as well as the corresponding increased public interest in Spiritualism, Deane exhibited the kind of business skills Hannah Mumler and Georgiana Houghton had, attaining success through her timely work yet downplaying the extent to which the potential for fame and profits served as her motivation.



Fig. 3.6. World War I servicemen accompanied by Deane's spirit guide, Brown Wolf. Ada Emma Deane, "Armistice Day 1921." Reprinted by kind permission of The British Library (© British Library Board, Cup.407.a.1).

With its inclusion of the image of a Native American chief's disembodied head extending across the top, Deane's 1921 Armistice Day photograph engaged the haunting effects of the colonial violence that had been etched onto the national psyche long before the trauma of World War I. Deane and her supporters identified the figure as a representation of her spirit guide, Brown Wolf (Jolly 125). Citing the kind of mythologized portrait of Native Americans that Molly McGarry argues featured centrally in Spiritualists' invocation of these spirits, Deane's photograph evokes an imperialist nostalgia for the idealized Native American warrior in its commemoration of fallen soldiers' valor (66-7). Deane's claim that this chief was her spirit guide also mirrors numerous mediums' and spirit photographers' channeling of those they named as their Indian guides; several of William Mumler's photographs show the famous medium Fanny Conant with spectral forms of Native Americans.²⁰ As McGarry observes, these materializations registered a contradictory engagement with the colonial history of genocide, their presence in the séance room and photographs serving to remind sitters of this violent past yet at the same time often recalling romanticized depictions of Native Americans' spiritual insight (80-1). Deane's "Armistice Day 1921" photograph exhibits a similar ambivalence, on the one hand its positioning of the chief at the top of the photograph signifying him as the men's spiritual leader, yet on the other hand, its juxtaposition of the Native American face against those of the white British men reminding the viewer of the contrasting circumstances for each figure's vanishing.

²⁰ See Chapter 2 for a longer discussion of Conant's mediumship.

However, Deane's photograph and others similar to it also configure the Native American body as an artifact capable of being replicated and redeployed in what becomes a visual rendition of an imagined imperial contact zone. The portrait of the chief acts as an essentializing embodiment of a nameless and vanished population rather than an accounting of the history of the otherwise anonymous Brown Wolf; the intense public interest in identifying the figures in the photographs was limited to the British men in uniform, whom Stead describes as "a group of 'Tommies' and 'Hearts of Oak Men' (sailors)" (28). Similarly, her photograph showing the faces of two figures she describes as her spirit guides stirred debate as a result of one of them bearing a close resemblance to a portrait published on the cover of *My Magazine* in 1921 (Figure 3.7). Warrick even describes her photograph as an obvious cut-out from the magazine – but attempts to explain away the fraudulent spirit photograph as an instance where the spirits themselves, rather than Deane, used the cut-out to produce the photograph (24). Such an explanation illuminates the predicament women faced in their work as mediums and photographers, as Deane was only redeemed by Warrick attributing all aspects of her technical labor to supernatural manifestations. Estelle Stead confirms this account, relating that "those on the Other Side explained" the spirit "extra" was in fact a copy, "given to prove that they had kept the mould, and were able to use it again under test conditions" (29). By circulating a spirit image she formed from a disembodied copy of a popular magazine portrait to depict her Native American spirit guide, Deane likens the colonized body to a media commodity, with the potential for its visual message to be endlessly reproduced. The image as well as her other portraits of her Native American spirit guides signifies the

ways Deane constructed spirits of color as performing a form of labor for her, for they represented to her Spiritualist patrons her access to these spirits' wisdom. Her efforts to ascribe her technical labor to them so as to preserve her career therefore exemplifies the ways mediums' portrayal of their non-white spirit guides often problematically reinforced cultural ideologies on race and the performance of labor.



Fig. 3.7. Ada Emma Deane, "Extras." Side-by-side comparison of portrait of Native American chief in *My Magazine* and Deane's spirit photograph.

Like Houghton, Deane was actively involved in her local Spiritualist community, and formed a network among other women Spiritualists in particular. Yet while Houghton worked closely with the medium Mrs. Guppy in Hudson's studio, Stead's and Warrick's narratives portray Deane as the sole author of the photographs she produced. Although her work at the British College of Psychic Science and in her makeshift processing room in her kitchen afforded her less access to the more expensive machinery Houghton was able to use when working in Hudson's studio, Deane's lack of dependence upon a male spirit photographer for the use of his studio meant she could claim ownership of her spirit images. Despite the necessity for her Spiritualist supporters to conceal her involvement in chemically treating the plates so as to attribute the ghostly

materializations to spirits, her photographs call attention to her labor in manufacturing the images. Deane's contemporaries in fact highlighted the direct role she played in producing the photographs. Warrick observes that the "freakish marks on photographic plates" he witnessed while investigating Deane's powers "were due to the influence of Mrs. Deane's hands"; in his introduction to his account of these investigations, he asserts, "Mrs. Deane does indeed possess great mediumistic powers" that allowed her to produce her acclaimed photographs (7, 1). On the one hand dependent upon the endorsement of male psychical researchers such as Warrick, Deane's spirit photography was also acknowledged as clearly under her own direction.

Warrick and Stead also reveal how Deane's work designated the practice of spirit photography as a collaboration among female mediums, with each providing details about Stead's frequent participation in Deane's photographic developments. Warrick frequently notes her presence during Deane's photography sessions, and Stead portrays her involvement in Deane's work as near-constant. While praising Deane's mediumistic and photographic skills, Stead also points toward Deane's reliance on her and other assistants. In defending the authenticity of Deane's mediumship, Stead therefore often describes instances such as the following, where her work in the darkroom becomes evidence of Deane's ability to conjure spirits on film rather than chemically produce the images. Stead writes:

I have had results and recognised faces on plates that Mrs. Deane has never handled, plates which I have brought in directly from the shop; taken at once to the dark room myself, loaded the dark slide and placed it in the camera. I have then drawn up the shutter, exposed the plate and developed it myself, Mrs. Deane merely being present in the room a few feet distant from the camera. (26)

Together with Stead's depictions of Deane's expertise in loading photographic plates, focusing the camera precisely and allowing for the correct exposure time before developing the images in her darkroom, her statement indicates how Deane's collaborative work with other female photographers redefined women's participation in photography. Whereas Houghton's attempts to direct Hudson's studio were occasionally impeded, Deane's control over her studio figured her work as independent of male patronage and authorship. Stead's account also relates that Deane's friends such as Felicia Scatcherd and her daughter, Vi, worked as Deane's assistants, signifying the fundamental part women mediums played in Deane's success. By forming a network of mediums who were of varying class statuses and worked alongside her, Deane presented a business model for spirit photography that made women's technical labor a central, and visible, feature of the process while still maintaining the fiction of the spirits' work.

In addition to Deane's professional habits, her characterization of her work destabilized constructions of gendered labor. Although crediting her spirit guides with the actual production of plates bearing materialized specters, Deane brought attention to her own work by claiming to facilitate such appearances. According to Warrick, Deane explains that the spirits' use of her energy for their appearances exhausted her to the extent that "she often felt sleepy when taking photographs" (275). Yet Deane also emphasized the control she had over her exertion of mediumistic powers; Warrick relates that her sensitivity allowed her to "always sense whether there is power about or not, and she can put out psychic force or withhold it" (276). Such a revelation contradicts many Spiritualist accounts of mediums' trances being wholly guided by unseen forces,

emphasizing her active decision to perform her often physically-taxing mediumship. And while her photographs certainly brought her an increasing number of clients, Deane asserted that she considered the affective labor she performed in “‘produc[ing] portraits to comfort sitters’” to be the most important aspect of her mediumship (qtd. in Warrick 29). Like Houghton’s, Deane’s and her supporters’ emphasis on this form of labor rather than on her earnings not only demonstrated to her patrons her commitment to Spiritualist beliefs, but also portrayed it as equally valuable as her physical work within the studio. While Deane’s and other Spiritualists’ focus on the affective nature of her labor obscured her technical expertise, they nevertheless recognized that her mediumistic influence during the entire photographic process was as crucial to spirit photography as the spirits’ involvement.

Deane’s awareness of her irreplaceable mediumistic skills also prompted her to portray her affective labor as invaluable to the Spiritualist community and broader society. In spite of giving her consent to be investigated by researchers such as Warrick, Deane stipulated the conditions for her work to the extent that even her ardent supporter Conan Doyle admitted she raised suspicions, particularly in her insistence that she obtain patrons’ plates several days ahead of their sitting in order to “‘magnetis[e]’” them (qtd. in Doyle 61). As such a timeframe directly corresponded to the time needed to manually develop an image, Conan Doyle’s unease in acknowledging what he terms an “‘embarrassing habit’” of hers exemplifies the inherent quandary Deane faced in acknowledging her work in the studio. However, it was her outright refusal to participate in an experiment arranged by the *Daily Sketch* that simultaneously elicited the public’s

skepticism and reveals her careful management of her career. After the newspaper ran a front-page spread exposing Deane's 1924 Armistice Day photograph as a sham, demonstrating that the "spirits" appearing in the image were reproduced photographs of famous footballers and boxers, it challenged Deane to produce spirit photographs under what it described as "fair conditions." Deane's rejection of this proposal despite the editor's offer to donate £1000 to charity if she could demonstrate her genuine mediumistic skills was widely interpreted as proof of her fraudulence. Yet the newspaper also printed Deane's letter of response, in which she protested she could not simply produce a spirit photograph "under any conditions." Presenting her work as resistant to a capitalist model of factory-line production, Deane maintained that her photographs "come from some power which works through me, and over which I have no control.... Such a power may work to console the afflicted folk, but I doubt if money would tempt it to come at the bidding of a newspaper man" (qtd. in Stead 50). Her displacement of the work onto an unseen "power" safely distances Deane from the taint of performing the physical labor of producing the photographs herself. Refusing to commoditize her portraits – or rather, refusing to do so on someone else's terms – Deane's resistance to the editors' attempt to manufacture images "to order" paradoxically is contingent upon her disavowal of her control over the photographic process (Stead 51). In her dismissal of the "newspaper man," Deane positions her work as a spirit photographer as antithetical to her previous employment as a charwoman, where her gift as a medium ensures that her labor is subject only to the conditions imposed by her spirit guides.

In contrast, Deane willingly participated in investigations by physical researchers who were receptive to her work, and the results illustrate the multifarious ways she transformed the medium of photography. In addition to photographing materialized spirit forms resembling the apparitions appearing in Mumler's and Houghton's images, Deane and researchers like Warrick considered alternative means of obtaining photographic evidence of spiritual influence. Their collaborative experiments in many ways built upon psychical research conducted in the first decade of the twentieth century, where spirit photographers began to shift their attention toward the use of light in their photographs; alternative sources of light illuminated the photographed séance room and were recorded on plates as spirit manifestations.²¹ Yet Deane's and her contemporaries' mediumship explored the possibility for the camera to capture not only various forms of light, but also movement and even sitters' private thoughts. Warrick describes Deane's photographs as notable for their "freak Extras" – streaks of what appear to be light or, as he acknowledges, chemicals – and attributes them to Deane's remarkable ability to render her sitters' thoughts and emotions visible on her photographic plates (42). In one series of photographs she took at Warrick's warehouse in his as well as her daughter's and his friend Mr. V.'s presence, "freak-marks" consisting of bright spots and streaks of light permeate the images, at times obscuring her sitters or appearing on their own, without

²¹ For example, Fournier d'Albe's *New Light on Immortality: Photographing a Spirit by the Magnesium Light* describes William Henry Harrison's attempts to photograph the spirits conjured by Florence Cook using magnesium light to better illuminate the materializations. Coates also details numerous experiments with spirit photographers and mediums using the camera to record images of electric sparks and light produced by spirits. Additionally, Grove provides an assessment of Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen's discovery of x-rays in 1895 and his subsequent production of x-ray photographs, which were associated with spirit photographs.

any sitters present (Figure 3.8). These blurred bands of light demonstrate the limitations of still photography to capture the apparent movement occurring in the portraits, whether by spirit forms or the patrons. In this way, the photographs with “freak-marks” perform a function similar to that of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spirit films Beckman examines, which she argues “simultaneously stage... a quiet exposure of the inadequacies of the medium of photography in order to assert the supremacy of film in relation to insubstantial matters” (73). Capturing only a moment of the spirits’ presence, Deane’s photographs prompt the viewer to question the capability of photographers to adequately produce a truthful visual representation of ghostly manifestations.



Fig. 3.8. Ada Emma Deane, “Camera Work.” Series of photographs by Deane of Warrick’s friends, which produced “freak-marks.”

Despite her use of this medium to in effect reveal its own insufficiency, Deane and her supporters present her photography as an interactive medium, one demanding that viewers regard her images as symbolic representations of mediumship. Warrick pronounces the above portraits to be evidence of her mind-reading skills and her ability to channel her sitters' thoughts and visually record them on her plates, detailing the instigating factors that produced these thoughts. His explanation of the image at the bottom-right corner of Figure 1.8 portrays Deane as capable of conjuring her patrons' secret emotions, as he considers the blurred light seeming to emanate from the head of one of the male sitters to be a lady's boot kicking him; this, he argues, represents another patron's disdain for the man as a result of his "German characteristics" (42). Such an interpretation echoes Deane's characterization of another of her photographs, in which her female patron whom Deane "violent[ly] dislike[d]" appeared with red marks across her face: Deane took this to signify her own private desire to "smack" her (275-276). Each case denotes the ultimately subjective nature of visuality; viewers' interpretations are as central a feature of Deane's photography as the images themselves. Deane's portraits with "freak-marks" are also emblematic of her ambivalence in claiming credit for the production of her images, as they evince the aesthetic labor she performed in creating the symbolic representations in spite of her claims that she merely channeled the spirits' development of them.

Deane's and Warrick's analysis also demonstrates how her work advanced spirit photographers' engagement with both science and visual art. While uniformly described as exhibiting spiritual emanations, Deane's photographs attempt to render visible human

thought processes and mediums' telepathic powers as often as they depict the spectral materializations that enthralled nineteenth-century Spiritualists. Engaging the investigations into human perception and consciousness that transfixed psychologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Deane's images as well as her photographic process reconfigured spirit mediumship to entail not only channeling spirits, but also psychically projecting thoughts onto film and visually presenting them in a meaningful way. Her experiments with Warrick beginning in 1923 in producing what they termed "skotographs" most vividly demonstrate their redefinition of spirit photography: consisting of plates bearing streaks of light and other abstract images, the photographs register, according to Warrick, psychical phenomena channeled through Deane during séances. Unlike the more recognizable forms with human features appearing in earlier spirit photographs and many of Deane's other pictures, these "freakish markings" test the viewer's ability to decipher them and demand an interpretation of their symbolic, often amorphous features much like contemporaneous surrealist paintings do (Warrick 46). The images thus prescribe a dual role for twentieth-century spirit photography, where its truth-telling purpose in providing visual evidence of a medium's extrasensory powers merged with its aesthetic function.

Deane's collaborative work with Warrick in producing skotographs thus critically intervened in Modernist visual culture as well as theories of technology and psychology. Her skotographs in fact introduced an entirely new branch of paranormal photography to Britain, dubbed "thoughtography" by the Japanese psychologist Tomokichi Fukurai when he began investigating it in 1910 (Braude 107). Although Fukurai's experiments were

never directly associated with spirit photography, Deane and Warrick suggested an implicit connection between her spirit mediumship and production of skotographs, as the spirits, they argued, similarly performed the invisible labor of representing her thoughts on film. Despite Deane's insistence on the intrinsic connection between her spirit photography and skotography, historians have focused on her images that are more recognizable as traditional spirit portraits and have neglected to include her work in the history of thought photography. Instead, art historians as well as philosophers such as Stephen Braude contend that Ted Serios pioneered this practice when he began developing "thoughtographs" in America during the 1950s and 1960s. These scholars credit Serios with "spark[ing] a renewed interest in paranormal photography" after Fukurai's experiments were discredited forty years earlier, while Deane's more controversial portraits such as her Armistice Day series continue to overshadow her skotography (Braude 108). Deane's insistence that all of her images resulted from spirits' labor may have enabled the neglect of her skotographs, rendering the abstract images more difficult for historians to classify alongside her earlier spirit photographs. Yet her outright exclusion from the history of thoughtography also indicates these scholars have been all too willing to avoid confronting the challenge Deane's work and her problematic attribution of it posed to constructions of visual culture and authorship.

Deane's skotographs suggest a new model for photographic spirit mediumship, for as Warrick explains, they are unique in that they bear psychic markings without having been exposed in a camera (46). Warrick initially exhibits some hesitation in deciding whether to attribute them to "an invisible operator" or simply to human fraud,

but subsequently describes obtaining these marks during séances with Deane; Deane herself admits to being unable to explain the exact nature of their production other than that they are a feature of her “photographic powers” (46, 29). Warrick further presents examples of Deane touching the plates—always in his presence, so as to assure his reader that she has not had an opportunity to mark them with chemicals—after which an image developed on the film. On one occasion in 1924, Warrick relates, he prompted Deane to participate in his experiment by having her hold onto the film and asking her to visualize her three-legged table. Directly after, three streaks of light appeared on the film (Figure 3.9); Warrick implies they represent the legs of her table (49). Citing additional instances of Deane’s skotographs recording her thoughts in abstract visual form, Warrick portrays the experiments as demonstrations of a form of psychic photography that no longer necessitated a camera. Instead, Deane served as both medium and instrument, conjuring and recording supernatural emanations at once. Yet unlike the frequent equation in Spiritualist literature of mediums’ instrumentality with unconscious automaticity, Deane’s skotography depended upon her conscious presence as Warrick asked her to produce a thought so it could be transferred onto film. While Deane’s body was instrumentalized in the series of experiments with Warrick, the labor she performed is also more conspicuous in the photographs. Without the intervening camera, it became more difficult for Deane and Warrick to continue displacing the technical and aesthetic labor required to develop the images onto spirits working behind the scenes. As a result, Deane’s relationship to these images resembles Beckman’s formulation of mediums birthing the products of their psychic gift, as she generated the material herself. Yet her

embodied role in the proceedings renders her authorship of them even more transparent than Houghton's ownership of her photographs' ghostly content: Deane's reconfiguration of spirit photography in her skotographs locates her centrally in the construction of the form and subject matter of the images she produced. Ultimately, this display of her authorial status appears to have contributed to Spiritualists' neglect of her later work, the increased visibility of her labor exposing the fabrication of spirit photographs.²²



Fig. 3.9. Ada Emma Deane, "Skotographs." Deane's psychic projection of three-legged table.

Illuminating the Unseen

Although Deane's earlier work received a considerable amount of public attention throughout the 1920s and 1930s, current studies of her career tend to concentrate on the accusations of fraud; as a result, Deane's photography has largely been portrayed either as the work of spirits or her own attempt to deceive her credulous supporters. Such an assessment neglects the complexity of the labor she, like Hannah Mumler and Georgiana

²² Deane's skotography inspired other mediums' attempts to produce similar types of images. Madge Donohoe, a contemporary of Deane's, extended the work Deane had begun by developing skotographs that increasingly centered on streaks of light and contained illuminated shapes such as flowers and stars. For more on Donohoe's skotography, see Warrick and Warner.

Houghton before her, performed in the photography studio as well as the vital function of mediumship within spirit photography. These mediums cultivated their success by grounding the characterization of their work in gender ideologies that assumed women's sensitivity and passivity in order to substantiate their claims of channeling spirits. By emphasizing their affective labor in conjuring spirits who then performed the work of displaying themselves on film, these women validated Spiritualist claims that their portraits verified spectral materializations and thereby sustained their careers. Required by their trade to deny their involvement in the physical production of the images, however, their portrayal of their work obscured their multifaceted roles in the photography studio, where their commercial, technical and aesthetic labor remained unacknowledged. Scholars continue to extend the effects of the mediums' obligatory disavowal of their work by excluding them from the historical record on spirit photography and thereby perpetuating gendered assumptions about women's mediumship. Yet Hannah Mumler's, Houghton's and Deane's contributions to spirit photography in fact crucially shaped cultural understandings of this media technology and its relationship to visual culture and gendered labor, their influence haunting the portraits together with the phantoms appearing in them.

Chapter Four
Staged Mediumship: Women's Public Performances of Spirit Communication

Reflecting on his tour of America in 1874, the renowned Spiritualist J.J. Morse lamented:

Mediums for physical manifestations abound, and they advertise public séances ... at an admission-fee of from fifty cents to a dollar. Doubtless many of these are mediums, but it is somewhat disagreeable to see the function of mediumship reduced to the level of the show business. (54)

His misgivings about public mediums exemplifies the concerns held by many in this community, but did little to curtail the popularity of these séance performers, which only increased as the century wore on. Both within private venues and in large halls across Britain and America, spirit mediums fascinated their patrons by appearing to not only summon spirits of the dead, but also produce tangible evidence of the spirits' presence. Yet despite the new emphasis on the materialization of physical objects, the medium herself became increasingly central to séances. To maintain the illusion that spirits were responsible for the manifestations, a medium prearranged the effects that would occur during the séance out of sitters' view, but her dramatic performance during the proceedings was equally crucial to conducting a successful séance. Beginning in the 1860s, Mrs. Guppy created a model of mediumship that reconfigured the séance room as a stage and gave the medium a starring role in appearing to conjure otherworldly goods as well as dramatizing their effects. Following this model, the late nineteenth-century stage medium Anna Eva Fay and early twentieth-century psychic Estelle Roberts similarly achieved great success. In the process, each of these women developed mediumship into the type of "show business" Morse disdained. Rather than diminishing

the profession, however, their performances became among the most successful means of disseminating Spiritualist beliefs on both sides of the Atlantic and directed the progression of stage mediumship from its foundation in theater to its association with technologized media.

Although Spiritualists employed nineteenth-century gender norms in characterizing women as the most suitable for spirit channeling as a result of their passivity and sensitivity, Guppy, Fay and Roberts visibly and publicly refashioned this model of mediumship in their performances. Crucial to their success as celebrated mediums was their emphasis on their own corporeality as they claimed that their bodies served as the means through which spirits established their connection to the physical world and communicated with sitters. However, while employing rhetoric associating women with instrumentality, they also undermined traditional ideals of femininity through their performances as well as their characterization of their mental exertion in communicating with spirits. Complicating the “dualistic divisions between... the body and the mind” that continue to inform gender ideology, Guppy, Fay and Roberts crafted their performances and onstage personalities to highlight both the embodied nature of spirit mediumship and their own conscious engagement in the effects of their conjuring (Hindson 43). Rather than appearing as passive vessels for spirit materializations, each performed their mediumship in a way that made them the star attraction of their shows. Through their careful construction of their personas, they appealed to Spiritualists hoping to contact the dead as well as secular audiences intrigued by their sensational performances.

Adopting this form of mediumship also allowed them to operate in venues traditionally closed to women during the era. While Guppy portrayed herself as a private medium who didn't accept fees, the publicity her séances attracted situated her as a public celebrity, thereby giving her considerable social power in Spiritualist circles and in broader culture. This status stemmed in large part from her presentation of lavish goods ostensibly manifested through her communication with spirits. Emphasizing commodity spectacles in her séances not only appealed to her middle-class sitters but also exposed mediumship's overt commercialism. Appropriating this theatrical style for her own shows, Fay attained recognition through her performances as she materialized objects in front of large audiences gathered in public halls. Fay's initial depiction of herself as a spirit medium was critical to her success, as it allowed her to perform magic onstage despite long-held biases against women becoming professional magicians. Although her later shows increasingly centered on secular conjuring tricks, her refusal to specifically attribute them to either supernatural guidance or to her skill as a magician ensured that she appealed to a range of audiences. In modifying mediumship for her early twentieth-century audiences as she progressed throughout her career, Fay diverted its focus away from the production of commodities and toward her own visibility as a performer. While this initially entailed her attracting spectators by conforming to cultural standards of feminine beauty, she came to extend the range of her stage acts so that they later centered on her conscious public speech.

Roberts built her performances around Fay's model, particularly by using mentalism in her shows, where she demonstrated feats of clairvoyance and mind-reading

and attributed her insights to communication with spirit guides. Situating the public stage as a venue for the mass observation of séance mediumship, Roberts communicated her clairvoyant insights to individual audience members on a vast scale, at times speaking to thousands of people at once. Her characterization of herself as a human broadcast medium, while drawing upon earlier Spiritualist associations of mediumship with unconscious instrumentality, nevertheless emphasized the female performer's presence in relaying spirit messages to assembled crowds. With her captivating onstage persona spurring members of the audience to openly discuss intimate details about those they mourned, Roberts transformed Spiritualist mediumship into a publicly-broadcast spectacle that established communal bonds among her spectators. In fashioning herself in this way, she represented a substantial transition in mediumship, as her performances featured her conscious engagement with audiences. Her spirit channeling forms the basis of present-day configurations of mediumship, which is often conducted remotely, with psychics consulting clients using the telephone or internet or by broadcasting their shows on television. The enduring popularity of these psychic readings is indicative of the ways Roberts, Guppy and Fay shaped mediumship as a spectacle, broadening Spiritualism's circulation as well as the possibilities for women's public performances.

“An Extraordinary Séance Took Place”: Mrs. Guppy and the Theatrical Séance

While the séances of the 1850s and early 1860s for the most part featured sounds – the rapping on tables by spirits as well as the medium's speaking for the spirits – those of the late 1860s through the 1890s largely shifted to visible manifestations. Agnes

Guppy²³ was primarily responsible for popularizing these effects throughout her long career after rising to fame within the Spiritualist community in the 1860s amid considerable competition among mediums. Across Britain and America, mediums attracted sitters by exhibiting the most striking evidence of spirits' presence. Mrs. Guppy, however, surpassed them all with the variety and volume of objects ostensibly delivered by the spirits to her séances. With the Spiritualist as well as popular press helping advertise Guppy's séances by publishing accounts of the events, she quickly became one of the most famous mediums in Britain. These reports, in addition to those appearing in letters to editors and spread by word of mouth among Spiritualist circles, significantly influenced popular perceptions of séances and increased the demand for manifestations. Mediums met this demand by materializing objects that entertained their guests and were usually aesthetically pleasing, and often signified the opulence of the spirit world. As Marlene Tromp contends, these items, particularly the flowers and food, were also traditionally associated with a woman's successful management of the home, and she argues that these presentations reinforced séance leaders' authority over both the domestic and spiritual worlds ("Eating" 290-291).

Guppy's séances, however, also undermined this image on multiple occasions; in fact, the séances over which she appeared to have the least control were the ones that attracted the most notice. Such disruptions substantiated her claims to merely be channeling spirits who in turn produced the miraculous effects. Perhaps more importantly, these events and Guppy's reactions to them also made her the center of the

²³ Despite her second marriage to William Volckman, Guppy (née Nichol) was known throughout her career by the name she took upon her first marriage to Samuel Guppy.

sitters' attention, to a greater degree than even the manifestations themselves. Scholars including Mackenzie Bartlett maintain that Spiritualism became "one of the most overtly theatrical trends" of the nineteenth century, and Guppy was largely responsible for this (273). Although critics have examined materialization séances held by young female mediums in the late nineteenth century, the effects of Guppy's gatherings on mediumship have received less attention. Pioneering effects where spirits seemed to apport a variety of objects such as flowers and food, she popularized a séance format that nevertheless rendered the medium the focal point. Producing what Spiritualists viewed as material evidence for the existence of spirits, Guppy directed her séances so that they rivaled the effects conjured onstage at the time by magicians who staged similar illusions. However, while Erika White Dyson contends that the dramatic physical manifestations séance attendees came to expect necessitated mediums who acted as "even more passive and silent vessel[s] for spirits to work through," Mrs. Guppy's mediumship emphasized her vocal and active engagement in the proceedings (246). In attracting innumerable sitters as well as considerable publicity for these events, Guppy rendered private séances public spectacles, in the process configuring them so that mediums had a starring role.

Sitters and the media alike acknowledged that the profusion of material goods appearing in séances was never more spectacular than when Mrs. Guppy was present. Whereas less powerful mediums might occasionally produce a bouquet of common flowers for their sitters, Mrs. Guppy could boast of a diverse assortment of plants arriving on her séance table. According to the spirit photographer Georgiana Houghton, who

worked closely with Mrs. Guppy throughout her career,²⁴ Guppy's spirit guides produced a dizzying array of beautiful flowers to please her sitters, including "tulips, ferns, hyacinths, daffodils, narcissus, cyclamens, and wallflowers" at just one sitting (59-60). She also made sure her sitters were aware of the freshness of the flowers to affirm the miraculous work of the spirits by showing them that "on squeezing the end of the stalk, juice flowed instantly" (66). The famed psychological researcher and naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace expressed his amazement at the materializations, writing that at one sitting the array "consisted of anemones, tulips, chrysanthemums, Chinese primroses, and several ferns. All were absolutely fresh, as if just gathered from a conservatory" (170). The displays reinforced to her sitters the spiritual significance of the objects: while on one hand they highlighted the spirits' power in an aesthetically pleasing way, their freshness also symbolized Spiritualists' belief in the continuation of life after death.

Sitters frequently asked the spirits to present them with flowers, and the medium Emma Hardinge Britten avers that those appearing at Guppy's séances were among the most beautiful; in one instance, the table around which sitters had gathered "was found literally piled up with lovely hothouse flowers, arranged with exquisite taste into divers[e] fanciful groups" (161). Such extravagant displays illustrate Mrs. Guppy's construction of séances as deeply rooted in bourgeois consumerism. Creating what amounted to a luxurious shopping experience for her sitters as they were presented with an extensive selection of goods, she fostered her success as a medium by facilitating commodity consumption. Yet crucial to her success was the necessarily unrecognized

²⁴ See Chapter 3 for a longer discussion of Houghton's work as a spirit photographer.

efforts of servants and other assistants who so carefully arranged the displays. Mrs. Guppy's fame thus depended on the effacement of her own and particularly her assistants' behind-the-scenes work. Although gaining considerable power in the Spiritualist community through her demonstrations of her mediumship, she ultimately reinforced middle-class authority by concealing this labor.

The floral arrangements were in themselves impressive to sitters, but the manner in which they appeared often became a significant feature of the events. Seemingly mocking sitters' desire for pristine evidence of spirits' existence, Guppy's spirit guides showered her guests with objects that surpassed their demands to the point of causing them unease. Rather than producing merely a few flowers, the spirits always seemed to provide excessive quantities of them; the *Freeman's Journal* ridiculed this, exclaiming that on one occasion, "flowers were tumbling in in thousands" ("Mrs. Guppy!"). On one occasion, when Guppy's husband asked the spirits to bring a sunflower to the sitters, one appeared in the middle of the table – but with the roots and soil still attached. Certainly exhibiting its freshness, the sunflower which "towered above" the sitters caused them and Mrs. Guppy a fair amount of consternation, as a "quantity of mould that had been brought with it, was scattered both on the table and on the carpet, so it was deemed advisable to clear all that manifestation into a large cloth" (Houghton 159). Evidently, this was not an unusual occurrence, as Florence Marryat describes a remarkably similar scene at another of Mrs. Guppy's séances: "laurestinus, and laurels, and holly and several others" were "thrown down in the midst of the group." Expressing barely contained horror at the invasion of nature into the home, Marryat exclaims that there "was piled up *on the carpet*

an immense quantity of mould, which had been torn up apparently with the roots that accompanied it”; her reaction was matched by Mrs. Guppy’s evident displeasure as she “begged the spirits would bring something cleaner next time” (137). While Mrs. Guppy’s floral materializations signified her commoditization of séance phenomena, their appearance simultaneously resisted the mass production of goods that attended the emergence of large department stores during the nineteenth century. The inordinate naturalness and freshness demanded Guppy’s patrons’ awareness of the high quality of her séance productions; the dirt and mold put further distance between the manifestations and the conventional showroom. Although such incidents presented the risk of repelling Guppy’s guests, they were also an effective means of publicizing the uniqueness of her events.

Similarly indicative of Guppy’s inability to always effectively contain these manifestations were the repeated appearances of large quantities of food at her séances. On one hand, such an abundance, which was always more than sufficient to feed her sitters, strengthened Mrs. Guppy’s position within the Spiritualist community, as it signified her successful management of both the domestic home and the supernatural (Tromp, “Eating” 288-289). Seemingly in command of “invisible waiters” who set the table for afternoon tea or dinner, Mrs. Guppy repeatedly impressed her sitters with her ability to conjure spirits who materialized these spreads, with enough tea and cakes on one occasion to serve all twelve of the sitters (Houghton 142-143). Houghton enumerates a representative example of the extensive array of food offered to Guppy’s guests: “a curious medley of apples, plums, almonds, carrots, turnips, &c.” was followed by the

appearance of a mussel upon Guppy's request (160). Delighting her middle-class sitters with a large selection of food they might expect at lavish dinner parties, Guppy aligned private séance mediumship with the provision of not only otherworldly knowledge, but also material comforts. As with the offering of fresh flowers, however, Guppy's attribution of the gustatory manifestations to her spectral assistants effectively ghosted her servants, who presumably were responsible for orchestrating the paranormal dinner party. In her assessment of the Victorian ghost story, Eve Lynch asserts that authors aligned domestic servants with the supernatural as they "furnish[ed] the house with a ghostly agency"; similarly, Houghton's narrative illuminates the ways powerful mediums such as Guppy obscured the human labor on which these spectacles depended (68).

The descriptions in Spiritualists' memoirs and in the popular press also point to more dramatic, yet potentially uncomfortable moments when Guppy's apparent control over her spectral servants slipped. Seeming to suggest an act of rebellion on the impish spirits' part, their presentation of excessive quantities or alarming varieties of the food sitters requested exposed the decadence of the fashionable private séances, which séance-goers attended as often to be entertained as to assuage their grief over bereavements. In the midst of presenting her sitters with an abundance of fruits, vegetables and seafood, for example, one of Mrs. Guppy's goldfish from her aquarium was mysteriously placed in front of a guest, "flapping about very energetically." Fulfilling the sitters' expectations for an entertaining spectacle, the relocation of the live fish startled the sitters, but appeared to cause Guppy even greater consternation as she returned it to its rightful place "in great haste" while "fear[ing] for [its] little li[fe]." Even more disruptive was the

unfortunate fulfillment of one sitter's facetious wish that eels would appear instead. Suddenly, Houghton reports, "Mrs. Guppy shrieked most fearfully, desiring that a light should be struck at once, when there was seen one live eel round her neck, and another on the table..., and likewise a live lobster in the middle of the table" (Houghton 160). Guppy's reaction to the gifts from her spirit guides contributed to the dramatic effects of the materializations, alarming her sitters but also adding a comical element to the scene. Such a spectacle, even if it came at her own expense, helped Guppy compete with other mediums, surpassing their more commonplace materializations of flowers and food. Appearing to summon spirits so powerful that they continually surprised sitters and even the medium with their antics, Mrs. Guppy demonstrated her proficiency in staging the most entertaining spectacles. At the same time, the disorderliness of the manifestations suggested they were the products of supernatural phenomena rather than a controlled retail environment.

These events made Guppy the focal point of her séances alongside the spirit manifestations, and she thus refigured the séance as a stage where the medium performed a dramatic and often amusing role. In fact, her séances were frequently publicized because of their outlandish displays and her responses to them. The abundance of food in her séances went hand in hand with these depictions, as Guppy's corpulence was frequently commented upon by séance attendees and in the press, with references to her overeating. The *Freeman's Journal*, for example, quotes the prominent Spiritualist Benjamin Coleman as describing Guppy as "'one of the largest and heaviest women of his acquaintance,'" and Russel Wallace expressed surprise at the spirits' ability to on one

occasion transport her around the séance room, as “[s]he was very stout and heavy” (“Mrs. Guppy!”; Wallace 170). Guppy not only took such affronts in stride, but exploited them as she fashioned her persona as a medium who entertained her clients. Houghton points out that Guppy was even recorded in a report on one of her sittings as expressing her fondness for food, claiming a “great weakness” of hers to be her propensity for “eat[ing] the manifestations” (14). Her confession would have appealed to her sitters’ own desires to partake in the paranormal feasts, calling attention to the association of the séance with middle-class consumption. Moreover, unlike the younger generation of female mediums who received acclaim for both their mediumistic skill and their physical appearance, Guppy prevented the sexualization of her mediumship, instead using her body for comedic effect. Such a strategy allowed her to compete with popular mediums such as Florence Cook; although for contrasting reasons, her physical presence at séances was equally an incentive for sitters’ attendance as that of the younger and more attractive mediums. On one hand, this emphasis reinforced the objectification of the female body which so often occurred in the séance room as well as in psychical researchers’ reports on mediums and their materializations. However, the manner in which she highlighted her corporeality also challenged Spiritualists’ idealization of the passive medium’s body. Guppy’s séances thus exposed sitters’ and scientists’ fixation on a specific model of female mediumship and presented an alternate formulation that stressed the medium’s active participation in producing the most entertaining elements of the séance. If, as Steven Connor writes, “the meaning of spiritualism has something essentially to do with

its irresistible tendency to collapse into comedy,” it is Mrs. Guppy who utilized this most successfully to challenge the standard conceptions of mediumship (“Machine” 205).

Even in her absence from the séance room, Guppy ensured that her theatrical affairs conveyed her far-reaching mediumistic powers. One of the most widely-publicized events of her career occurred at a séance held by Guppy’s rival Florence Cook, where Guppy initially was not among the sitters. However, Cook’s spirit guide Katie King announced to the sitters that she would compel Guppy to appear in front of them, and suddenly, ““a single heavy sound was heard for an instant... and Mrs. Guppy was found standing motionless on the centre of the table, trembling all over”” (qtd. in Houghton 98). A reporter for the *Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser* appeared to delight in detailing the materialization of a medium so well-known for her conjuring of ethereal objects: “She was not dressed for an excursion, and was without shoes. She had a memorandum-book in one hand and a pen in the other. The last word inscribed in the book was ‘onion’” (“A ‘Flying Female’”). The eleven sitters at Cook’s séance attempted to comfort Guppy while also peppering her with questions to determine how she had managed such a feat, but she denied having any role in orchestrating her materialization, claiming that the last thing she remembered was sitting at home with her housekeeper and documenting domestic expenses. Adding to her distress was the fact that as she had not planned on leaving the comfort of her home that night, “she was not dressed in visiting costume, and had no shoes on” (Houghton 98). After Guppy’s complaint a pair of slippers belonging to one of the sitters miraculously dropped into the séance room as if on cue, followed by her set of house keys and her boots (100). Now

properly clad in traveling gear, Guppy led the séance group back to her home, where they investigated the circumstances of her disappearance to determine whether, as they surmised, the spirits had transported her the several miles over to Cook's séance. Upon questioning, Mr. Guppy contributed to the farcical situation by playing the role of the aloof husband, freely admitting that his wife's disappearance did not interrupt his billiards game with a neighbor; he also reported that the subsequent assurance the spirits gave him of her safety allowed him to traipse off to bed before her return (101).

In collaborating with the members of her household as well as Cook to stage this event, Guppy bolstered her fellow medium's reputation for conjuring at the same time that she reminded Spiritualists of her own patronage by the spirits. Persuading Cook's guests to join her on her investigation at her home also conveniently diverted them away from the rival medium's show and toward the frequent site of Guppy's séances. In some reports of the event, Guppy even outshines Cook; the *Freeman's Journal* and the *Huddersfield Chronicle* neglect to mention that the séance was conducted by Cook or name the others present, describing only Guppy's supernatural transportation. Moreover, the manner in which she accomplished the excursion highlighted the dramatic and amusing nature of her spirit communications for which she was already famous, further publicizing her talent as a medium. Though she appeared to be abjectly humiliated, her performance made the impromptu materialization more memorable for the séance attendees, rendering it a convincing display of her connection to the spirits. It also masked the underlying promotional value of her journey across London to materialize in front of prospective clients and visibly demonstrate her unique gift as a medium. Her

transformation of mediumship into the production of commodity spectacle thus extended even to her comparison of herself in this incident to the materialized objects she conjured in the séance room. While apparently verifying the spirits' ability to convey a living person across a busy metropolis, her mysterious arrival in fact rendered her the focus of the séance. Unlike later mediums such as Eva C., whose "materializations were paradoxically predicated upon her own vanishability and general lack of self," Guppy's teleportation diminished the potential for her to be eclipsed by the production of spectral manifestations (Beckman 81). However, in ascribing the likely efforts of her servants to arrange ground transportation and feign Guppy's materialization at the center of the séance table to her spirit guides, she also rendered her assistants' labor invisible.

Rather than being overshadowed by spirit materializations or even rival mediums, Guppy continually found ways to attract attention within the Spiritualist community as well as wider society. Although intent on debunking fraudulent mediums, popular stage magicians also focused their attention on Guppy, publishing accounts designed to ridicule her but in the process promoting her skill at orchestrating sensational spirit manifestations. John Maskelyne, for example, devoted a portion of his exposure of mediums to the incident, explaining that her being "carried *by the spirits* to 69 Lamb's Conduit Street, where... she dropped through the roof and through several ceilings (without leaving any apertures)" constituted "the great marvel by which she obtains a

niche in the Spiritual Temple of Fame” (99-100).²⁵ The depiction of the event in the cover art for his work also highlights the humorousness of the teleportation narrative, and with its rendering of a “spirit” being supported by a bottle, plays on the double meaning of the word to suggest Guppy had experienced an alcohol-induced hallucination rather than a physical transportation (Figure 4.1). While the author’s sardonic commentary on

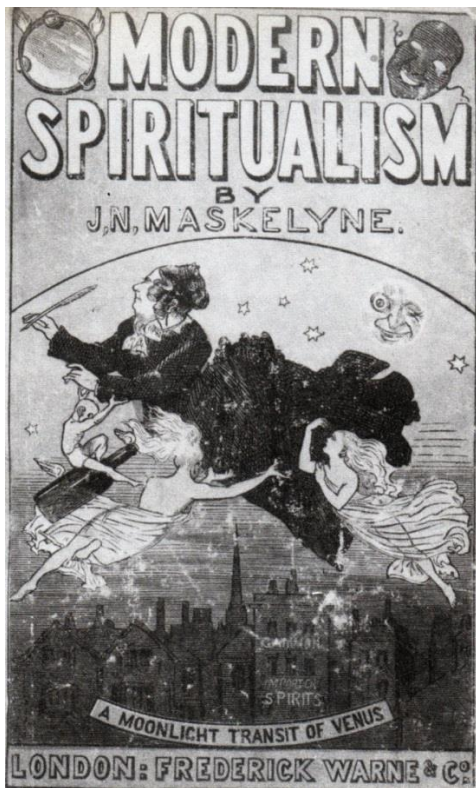


Fig. 4.1. Mrs. Guppy transported by spirits across London. From the cover of Maskelyne’s *Modern Spiritualism* (1876).

²⁵ He also includes another mark of her fame from the episode, a poem the writers of *Punch* crafted for the occasion:

There is a lady, Mrs. Guppy –
 Mark, shallow scientific puppy!–
 The heaviest, she in London, marry.
 Her, spirits three long miles did carry.

Upon a table down they set her,
 Within closed doors. What! you know better,
 And we’re all dupes and self-deceivers?
 Yah! Sadduces and unbelievers! (100)

the absurdity of ghosts magically carrying a portly woman across London presents an unflattering portrait of Guppy, it helped circulate an image Guppy herself had cultivated as being unconstrained by social ideals about women's behavior and beauty. As a result, Guppy was able to emphasize her authority as a medium in effecting the spectacle of her supernatural excursion rather than having it overshadowed by aesthetic judgments about the medium's body.

Although by the 1870s Guppy had begun including the appearance of spirit forms in her sittings in the wake of the popularity of mediums like Cook who made such apparitions the centerpiece of their séances, the focus of these events remained on her. Marryat's chronicle of the séances she attended with Guppy, for example, indicates that the appearance of the heads of two spirits, followed by "various pairs of hands," was as dramatic as Guppy's interaction with the materializations. According to Marryat, "the faces went close to the media, as if with the intention of kissing them. This frightened Mrs. [Guppy-]Volckman, so that she frequently screamed and dropped her end of the sheet" covering the spirits; they "made her at last so nervous that she threw the sheet down and refused to hold it any more" (135). While on one hand curtailing the spirits' appearance, Guppy's reaction to them also heightened the tension of the sitting, providing a spectacle in itself. Her disruption at the moment when the spirits approached her with what Marryat suggests were lascivious intentions also prevented the séance from devolving into the impropriety that, as Tromp writes, featured in other materialization mediums' shows (*Altered States* 21-23). In doing so, Guppy ensured she remained the central focus of the séance without being sexually objectified during its proceedings.

Although the younger mediums, in particular Cook, came to surpass Guppy's popularity in the late nineteenth century, Guppy presented an alternative model of physical mediumship that made her theatrical performances the most important feature of her séances. Configuring the private séance room as a stage, she carefully cultivated her celebrity through her presentation of commodities she attributed to her spirit guides' intervention. Appealing to her middle-class patrons by presenting séances that replicated an exclusive retail experience, Mrs. Guppy fashioned mediumship as a public and commodified entertainment. In doing so, she created a model of stage mediumship that strongly influenced later mediums like Fay and Roberts who similarly found success through their performances.

Ghostly Illusions: Anna Eva Fay's Conjuring Spectacles

In contrast to Mrs. Guppy, the American medium and magician Anna Eva Fay spent the majority of her career on the public stage (Figure 4.2). Born Ann Eliza Heathman in rural Ohio in 1851, Fay was persuaded by her Spiritualist family that she possessed mediumistic sensitivity and began holding private séances within the local community in her teens (Wiley 20, 43-4, 113). Her 1871 marriage to a medium who had achieved notoriety for his widely-debunked séances, Henry Melville Fay, initiated a shift in her own mediumship: it is at this point that she began a multi-state tour throughout the Midwest and the Northeast, where she held séances for paying customers (115). Soon after, with her husband joining her as her manager, Fay visited the United Kingdom and attracted the attention of the daily press and Spiritualist journals on both sides of the

Atlantic. Performing her mediumship in private séances as well as onstage at large venues such as the Queen’s Hall and the Crystal Palace, Fay also garnered the attention of William Crookes, who was at the time conducting tests on Florence Cook. After obtaining permission from the Fays to conduct similar experiments on Anna, Crookes was joined by eminent scientists such as Henry Sidgwick and Frederick W.H. Myers, who later helped establish the Society for Psychical Research, in investigating Fay’s claims of communicating with spirits. The resulting report Crookes issued in 1875 affirmed Fay’s mediumistic abilities, although his findings did not diminish suspicions that her act amounted to nothing more than well-executed trickery (Brock 195-9).²⁶



Fig. 4.2. “Anna Eva Fay, Three-Quarter Length Portrait, Seated, Facing Front.” 1900. (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division).

²⁶ For detailed analyses of these experiments, see Oppenheim and Brock.

Fay persisted in attributing the phenomena observed in her performances to occult forces even in the face of multiple exposures and denunciations over the next several decades, particularly by magicians like Harry Houdini, who argued Fay was merely adopting their techniques and portraying them as supernaturally guided. In newspaper advertisements, letters to the editors of prominent Spiritualist publications including the *Medium and Daybreak* and throughout her increasingly popular performances on stage, Fay carefully managed the public's perception of her, disavowing her skill at legerdemain. Insisting she merely aided spirit forces in producing miraculous effects onstage, Fay portrayed herself as a conduit for the spirits' work rather than as a magician. Not only did such a stance draw larger audiences by exploiting the obsession in England and America with Spiritualism, but more importantly, it placed Fay in a position where she could direct her conjuring performances in an era when women in this domain were largely relegated to acting as assistants to male magicians.

Milbourne Christopher and Barry Wiley describe Fay's husband, Henry, as her instructor and manager, yet records of her performances and conversations with the popular press make it clear that she quickly came to shape her career and her persona as a public medium. It was necessary for her to carefully construct this image in order to continue drawing crowds typically comprised of a mix of socioeconomic statuses; as Alex Owen explains, public mediums risked damaging their reputations through their association with the working classes (51). As she had been born into poverty and had come to earn a living from her shows, Fay faced the challenge of presenting herself to her audience in a way that substantiated her powers as a medium, diverting attention away

from herself as a paid performer and toward the apparent feats of the spirits. Thus, early reports of her performances remark upon her husband's visible direction of the shows, as he gave the opening lecture introducing her and predicting the manifestations the audience would witness (Willis 173; "Séance"). The British newspaper *The Graphic*, for example, reported that William Fay "conducted the proceedings" of a public séance at the Crystal Palace, and that the manager Isaac Wilkinson "assured the audience that the room had been prepared by himself and that no outside agency was at work" ("Spiritualism v. Conjuring"). Descriptions such as these of her early performances render Anna Fay the silent spectacle of her shows, where she appeared to passively channel spirits who in turn produced the manifestations. Even the skeptical journalist reviewing her public séances in London for *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* was careful to employ the passive voice in describing her feats, so as to avoid attributing them to her outright. While Fay remained "firmly secured" with ties binding her neck, hands and feet to her chair, he recounts, "Figures were cut out of paper, bells were rung and guitars played, part of a glass of water was drunk, and a pail hung round the lady's neck." Despite dismissing her dark séances as producing "weak and childish manifestations," the reporter admitted he had not been able to detect any interference on Fay's part, and that "no clue to the mystery could be discovered" ("Spiritualism or Conjuring").

It was Fay's careful work with her husband to create the choreographed spectacles that led to her popularity among Spiritualists and the lay public alike. While concealing her labor behind the scenes with William and theater managers in setting up the stage for her illusions, her visibility during her performances was key to her success. Fay

demonstrated an awareness of the important role her physical appearance played in the popularity of her public séances, as her costumes became increasingly eye-catching after newspaper reporters began remarking on her beauty and youthful appearance. An 1882 profile of her devotes its conclusion to a lengthy description of one of her costumes which she allowed the writer to examine, noting the expensive material and “exquisite design” which “to the artistic eye will not go unappreciated.” The reporter also reveals Fay’s willingness to invest in ornate dresses to be used in her shows, declaring that “[t]he lady is said to have one of the most elegant wardrobes ever worn before an audience, and to wear at one time \$20,000 worth of gems” (“Annie Eva Fay”). While her ability to dazzle her audiences with such elaborate costumes only attended her success in the late 1870s, her use of them was clearly inspired by the publicity she had received for her physical appearance in her earlier performances. Several articles written upon her 1874 debut in London, for example, comment upon her “most attractive appearance”; Wiley notes that “[a]n often repeated complaint was that Annie’s attractiveness was hidden for too much of the time by the curtain and the darkness” (130, 117). Other articles fixate on the deep cut or tight fit of her dresses, with some speculating upon the degree to which they facilitated her conjuring (Christopher 174-5; “Mystified”). Her deliberate display of herself in this way not only enabled her legerdemain, but also helped ensure she maintained audiences’ attention. Fay’s mediumship thus denoted a considerable departure from Mrs. Guppy’s, as her aesthetic appeal formed a central element of her shows. Whereas Guppy’s séances highlighted the materialization and consumption of desirable goods, in Fay’s performances, her body in effect became the commodity on display.

Rumors about Fay's fraudulence intensified after Crookes' publication of his investigations of her with the SPR; William Brock maintains that even at this early point in her career stage magicians widely considered her to be "a highly competent illusionist" (198).²⁷ Regardless of the community's acknowledgement of her skill as a magician, however, she continued to build her career as a stage medium. Advertisements for her public séances described her as "the celebrated spiritual physical test medium... indorsed by William Crooks [*sic*], F.R.S., and other members of the Royal Society" (qtd. in Wiley 197). Despite having been publicly exposed as an illusionist, most devastatingly in 1876 by her former manager Washington Irving Bishop, she continued to perform the acts from her earliest shows, garnering ever-increasing audiences (206). In all of them, Fay played the roles of both magician and medium, performing variations of the escape tricks popularized by illusionists such as the Davenport brothers.²⁸ Rather than merely demonstrating her escape from bonds, however, Fay continued to portray her talent as her ability to channel spirits who played music and drank water from glasses while she remained secured. Yet her direction of the séances became more overt during these years; beginning in the 1880s, which Beckman characterizes as "the decade of the vanishing woman," Fay became increasingly visible as well as vocal (47). Taking advantage of Spiritualist beliefs that afforded women central roles as mediums, Fay maintained her

²⁷ In a review of Brock's work, Barry Wiley disputes this and other assertions, arguing that Fay did not perform magic until the early twentieth century. However, due to several public exposures of her mediumship as illusions within the first few decades of performing, Fay's acts were frequently attributed to her proficiency as a magician early on in her career.

²⁸ Ira and William Davenport, who were among the most popular stage performers in the nineteenth century, performed conjuring acts they attributed to their spirit mediumship; Simon During contends that they "effectively transformed the presentation of spiritualist phenomena into an illusion show" (155).

distance from professional stage magic as it restricted women from attaining such control.

Performing in much larger venues by this point, with audiences numbering in the hundreds and at times thousands, Fay employed many magicians' tricks while attributing the manifestations to spirits. One of her typical acts was her identification of cards held up to the audience and out of her view, and she included this in her shows throughout the 1880s and 1890s (Wiley 236). Her adoption of such magic tricks, as well as her use of audience members as voluntary assistants, placed her in the principal role magicians occupied in their shows despite her protests that the feats were performed by spirits. In fact, the *Milwaukee Sentinel's* review of one of her shows in the early 1890s portrays the spirits as Fay's assistants as she directed them through her mediumship, where they "danced around and did her bidding without hesitation." Employing an automaton in the shows as magicians like Maskelyne had, she "instructed her subjects of the vasty deep to do their prettiest for the crowd," with a spiritually-guided "talking hand" answering questions posed by the audience through a series of raps given on a window pane ("Spirits"). Ascribing the seemingly independent movements of the hand to spiritual control, her use of the "talking hand" in magic shows nonetheless made it possible for her to assume the role of a magician. Yet in portraying her function in the supernatural communications as one where she facilitated rather than produced the entertaining spectacles, Fay "disavow[ed] or etherealize[d] the workings of mechanism" in a way that mirrored secular conjuring performances at the turn of the century (Connor, *Dumbstruck* 354). Such a stance masked the technical labor behind the construction of the automaton

as well as the assistance she received from stagehands in ensuring it functioned during her shows. By adopting this “talking hand,” Fay therefore manipulated the mystification of modern technology to win her acclaim as a gifted medium, but in the process overshadowed her assistants’ work.

Using the “talking hand” to predict election results and other news items, Fay reappropriated a popular feature of magic shows to compete with illusionists and continue attracting large audiences to her public séances. Newspapers and magazines also began publishing detailed interviews with her, where she announced the feats she would exhibit to her audiences and stressed her commitment to Spiritualism. The *Galveston News*, for example, served as a venue in which Fay expressed her confidence in her gift as a spirit medium, and explained what she perceived to be the chief differences between Spiritualism and other Christian beliefs. She also suggested she had evangelistic motivations for her séances, for with them she “show[ed] to the world the wondrous beauties of spiritualism, and ma[de] converts to our religion” (“Annie Eva Fay”). Never one to shy away from media attention, Fay now capitalized on journalists’ desire to obtain information about her and her popular shows, using these interviews as a means of promoting Spiritualism and in turn attracting more clients.

Fay’s public séances began to directly serve as venues for proselytizing about Spiritualism as well as persuading thousands of spectators that the manifestations she produced onstage were created by spirits. She began giving the introductory lectures to her séances instead of Henry, in which she asserted the “extraordinary phenomena” her audience would witness were the result of “the efforts of disembodied spirits to make

themselves consciously manifest, and to communicate intelligently with those who are still in the physical form” (qtd. in Wiley 227). In giving these comments, Fay followed the path established in the 1850s by trance mediums such as Cora Scott and Lizzie Doten,²⁹ who often lectured on issues ranging from abolition to women’s rights (Braude 92-98). However, while these trance mediums attributed their speeches solely to the spirits they channeled, Fay increasingly incorporated her own opinions into her shows, blending what she described as communication from the spirits with her own conscious speech. *The Milwaukee Sentinel* reports in an 1891 profile that Fay regaled her audiences with tales about her travels in Europe and Russia, and revealed her thoughts on the latter in particular. Fay declared herself to be a “stout defender of the czar” in her lectures, asserting that he was making a concerted effort to “enlighten his people and improve their conditions.” Her public support of the czar and depiction of him and his wife as mixing “freely with the people” presented a controversial portrait of the emperor that intervened in constructions of political ideologies (“Mystified”). Although it was the entertaining spectacle of spiritual manifestations that drew thousands to her shows and prompted many more to read articles such as these, Fay modified public séances so that mediums in effect shared the stage with the spirits, their own conscious public speech guiding their shows as much as the spirits’ communication. Distancing herself from the type of mediumship Guppy had practiced which emphasized the materialization of commodities, Fay refashioned stage mediumship so that it figured her as a political commentator.

²⁹ For more on trance mediumship performances, see Braude, McGarry and Owen.

As Fay had primarily remained silent while channeling the visible and audible effects of the spirits' presence in the early years of her career, her vocal participation in her séances during the 1880s marked a significant shift in her performances. While advertisements for her shows continued to claim that Fay would produce the visual effects of spirit materializations, she devoted larger segments to the "spirit communication" in which she relayed information she claimed to receive from the spirits to individual audience members. Noticing the popularity of this segment of the shows, Fay and her new husband, John Pingree, her former manager whom she had married after Henry Fay's death in 1889, began revising her performances so that the main attraction became what they called "Somnolency." In this act, which she almost wholly appropriated from Samri Baldwin, whom Wiley identifies as the "originator of the modern mind-reading act," Fay answered select audience members' questions after they had written them down just prior to the start of her show (252; Figure 4.3). Pingree and Fay had studied Baldwin's performances, where his assistants handed out seemingly blank tablets to the audience, which were in fact carefully crafted with paraffin and white wax so as to pick up imprints of the writing Baldwin's assistants subsequently read and matched to a seating chart. Having done preliminary research on the town and audience prior to each performance, the assistants were well-equipped to pass along the answers to these questions to Baldwin and his wife, who provided the answers while entranced onstage by Baldwin. Fay and Pingree employed a similar method, though using carbon paper rather than paraffin and wax, and Fay devoted the concluding segment of her shows in the 1890s to it (252-9). Adopting the Somnolency act not only increased her

popularity as a stage medium but also allowed Fay to alter her onstage personality to become “the world’s greatest and most gifted mental telepathist” (291). In the process, she shifted the emphasis of mediumship from the manifestation of physical evidence of spirits to the dissemination of the medium’s far-reaching knowledge. Her popular “Somnolency” show thus transformed stage mediumship so that it no longer focused on consumable objects, but instead centered around personal connections the medium made to individual audience members as she conjured information about them.

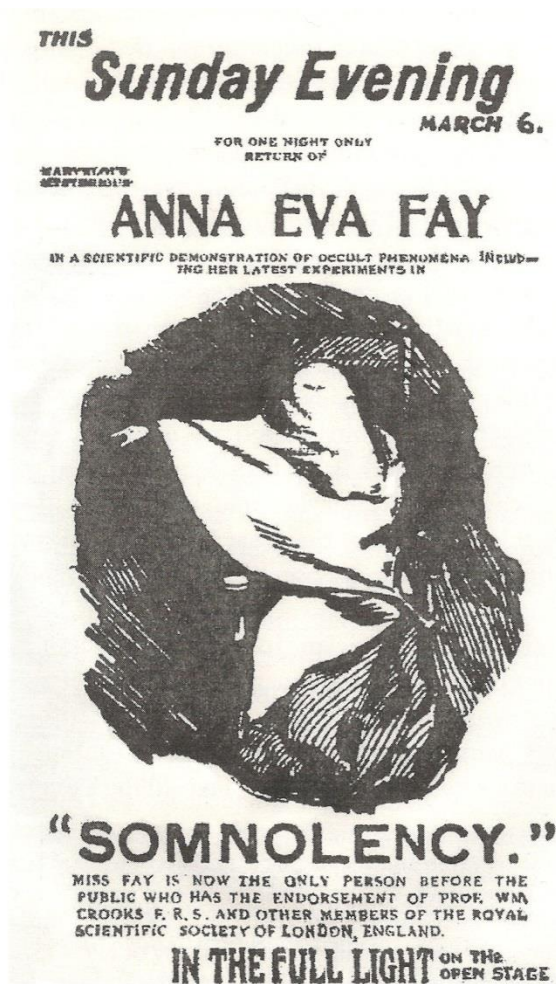


Fig. 4.3. An 1899 poster advertising Fay’s Somnolency act.

While attributing to her spirit guide her acquisition of information it appeared only individual audience members could know, Fay's new Somnolency act associated her role as a performer even more closely with that of a stage magician and further undermined the boundary between magic and mediumship. Marketing herself as a stage mentalist allowed Fay to incorporate more of the popular acts magicians like Maskelyne performed, including levitations and disappearing acts. In one set of shows, she assumed the magician's role throughout the performance, employing a female assistant whom she mesmerized before making her levitate in front of the audience. The most astonishing part of the show was a trick that had, as Beckman writes, become a standard feature of male magicians' acts in the previous two decades: after covering the levitating assistant with a cloth at the beginning of the act, she pulled the cloth from the assistant and revealed that the latter had vanished (Beckman 46-49; Wiley 291). Although she continued to characterize her shows as supernaturally guided, Fay affirmed her control over the proceedings by invoking the traditional magic trick of erasing the female assistant working alongside her. Such a problematic gesture underscores the predicament Fay faced in establishing her career as a magician, as she exhibited her ability to perform according to the standards of the magician community at the expense of reinscribing cultural norms that excluded women like her.

Resisting newspaper reporters' as well as rival magicians' attempts to define her shows as either wholly guided by occult influences or the sole result of her prestidigitation, Fay attracted audiences consisting of believers and skeptics alike. However, while in 1893 Fay had emphatically denied there was "any suggestion of

slight-of-hand or legerdemain” in a newspaper profile on her, in 1913 she appeared to contradict this statement by applying for membership in the Magic Circle, an elite magicians’ guild which had been formed less than a decade earlier (“A Medium”; Wiley 299). Such a move clearly puzzled those familiar with her work, including William Marriott, a prominent illusionist. Marriott expressed his surprise at her application in several letters to the Secretary of the Magic Circle, Henry Donn, remarking in one letter that “[i]n view of her claims in the past and those still made though very guardedly her enrolling herself as a conjurer is both important and interesting.” In fact, Fay had begun describing herself as a “mystic” in the early twentieth century, to the extent that, as was pointed out in a letter to the editor of *The Daily Chronicle*, her programs began including disclaimers that ““there is nothing either supernatural or miraculous about her performance and the audience may draw their own conclusions as to the exact method employed”” (MS HPC/3E/27).

Despite her efforts to incorporate elements of Spiritualist mediumship into her shows, the Magic Circle came to the conclusion that her work positioned her as a magician and they bestowed upon her the title of “Honorable Lady Associate of the Magic Circle” in February of 1913, making her the first woman to be formally associated with the group (Wiley 299). Yet her conflicting public statements and advertisements portraying her as a psychic provoked Marriott to ask Donn whether she was elected on the basis of “her work as a medium or on account of her Music Hall Performances” (MS HPC/3E/27). Donn’s reply that ““under no circumstances would she have been admitted as a member of the Society as a Spiritualistic medium[,] her election being as a Music

Hall artiste” reveals the bias Fay faced because of her association with Spiritualism. Yet the fact that a career as a magician would hardly have been an option for her is evinced by Donn’s clarification of the nature of her membership: “She was not elected an Hon. Associate of the Inner Circle, but an Hon. Lady Associate of the Magic Circle”; consequently, “she could only attend any meeting that was set apart for ladies” (qtd. in Wiley 300). Despite her international fame and recognition for the skill with which she performed the same feats as the elite Inner Circle, her fellow magicians’ sexism made it impossible for Fay to obtain the same membership privileges as her male colleagues. Unsurprisingly, she never took Donn up on his offer to attend one of these meetings.

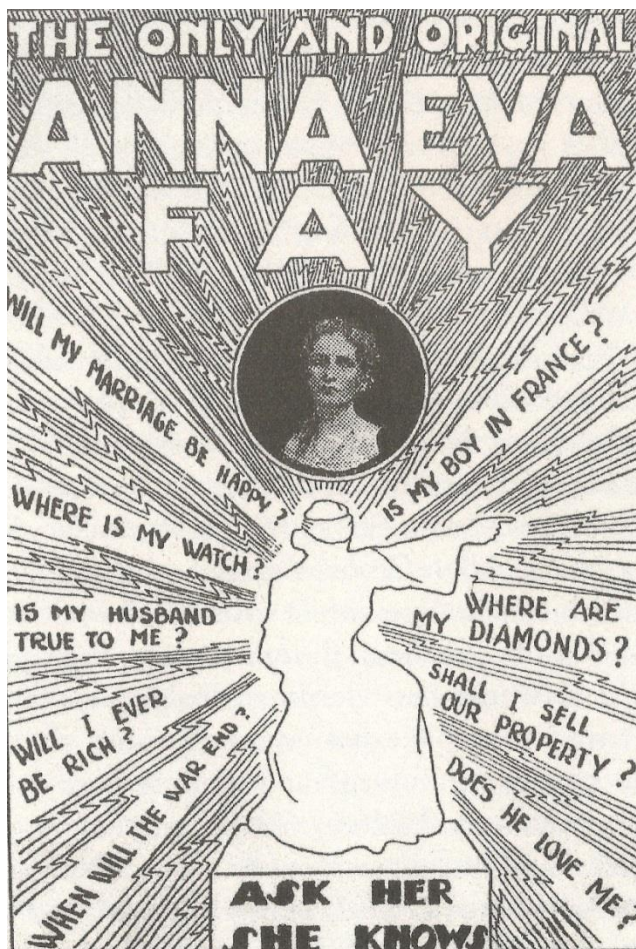


Fig. 4.4. A 1917 advertisement for Fay’s mentalism act.

Fay's subsequent lack of involvement in this fraternity not only indicated her dissatisfaction with her status as an Honorable Lady Associate; more importantly, it allowed her to continue presenting herself in a way that blended mediumship with magic. Throughout World War I and into the early 1920s, Fay's performances concentrated on her psychic demonstrations, where she claimed to predict future events and answered audiences' personal questions on subjects ranging from cheating husbands to missing jewelry (Figure 4.4). The horror and uncertainty of the war rendered her shows even more appealing, as other stage clairvoyants and spirit mediums discovered, and the questions mainly concerned the war and loved ones caught in it (Wiley 304-5). Her psychic question-and-answer sessions during this time served as a prototype for mediumship in the twentieth century, as she popularized a format that directly engaged more of her audience. While maintaining Guppy's commercialization of séances, she transferred the emphasis in stage mediumship from the production of consumable goods to the dissemination of information. Yet by figuring herself as the central spectacle of her performances, she nonetheless achieved her success by conforming to a gendered aesthetic ideal Guppy resisted.

The Magic Circle's refusal to recognize Fay as a full member of its elite association signifies the ways gender ideologies restricted her from representing herself primarily as a stage magician. However, such exclusion also stemmed from professional magicians' skepticism about her early portrayal of herself as a spirit medium: in presenting their performances as supernaturally guided, magicians feared, mediums diminished the work of secular illusionists and threatened to steal their audiences. Fay's

fame as a medium and illusionist proves such concerns were well-founded. Her work undermined the boundary between the two professions, and revealed that despite magicians' and mediums' characterization of them as diametrically opposed, they were in fact closely related. Her unwillingness to attribute her shows solely to occult influences or her own prestidigitation was critical to her success as a medium and increased the popular appeal of Spiritualist mediumship for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century audiences. Yet portraying her performances as at least to some extent supernaturally influenced also gave her a leading role in them which would otherwise have been unattainable had she pursued a career as a professional illusionist. As she promoted her Somnolency act and psychic abilities during the latter part of her career, Fay laid the groundwork for later mediums like Roberts to build their own stage careers.

**“I Am Not Calling Up the Dead.... They Are Calling Me!”³⁰:
Estelle Roberts' Broadcast Mediumship**

As Fay's career was winding down, Estelle Roberts was just beginning her own as a publicly performing medium. While never aligning her mediumship with magic as had Fay, the hallmark piece of Roberts' performances was an exhibition of clairvoyance quite similar to Fay's Somnolency act. In the 1920s, not long after she had begun giving private séances to the London Spiritualist community, Roberts moved to the stage, speaking initially to dozens of Spiritualists and at the peak of her popularity, to thousands gathered in venues including the Royal Albert Hall (Figure 4.5). Roberts' public speaking continued a well-established tradition of entranced spirit mediums giving lectures

³⁰ Roberts, quoted in Barbanell (93).

onstage. Like these mediums, Roberts attributed the knowledge she conveyed to her control spirit, thereby rendering the wisdom she disseminated more authoritative to believers. However, Roberts overtly directed her performances in a way that built upon the style Fay had adopted during her Somnolency act, where she appeared to clairvoyantly answer individual questions posed by audience members rather than speaking on the types of broad, often philosophical or academic subjects that had been the focus of earlier mediums' lectures. By attributing her insight to her spirit guide, Roberts united early trance speakers' mediumship with Fay's brand of mentalism. Most importantly, her performances denoted a significant shift in mediumship, as she not only consciously participated in the proceedings, but also made her affective engagement with her audience a central component of her shows.

Claiming to channel supernatural intuition to answer individual audience members' personal questions in front of large crowds, Roberts modernized the format of public mediumship, in effect transferring the private séance to the public stage. Her frequent portrayal of herself as an embodied broadcast technology was an important feature of her redefinition of mediumship, as she revised nineteenth-century conceptions of mediums' unconscious instrumentality, proposing instead that her conscious engagement in relaying spirit messages was crucial to her success. Her role therefore resisted what Jeffrey Sconce defines as "the central paradox of wireless," where "the very technology that expanded the possibilities of public communication carried with it reminders of individual isolation" (65). Instead, her transmission of spirits' messages to large audiences forged believers' perception of being part of a community where they

sympathetically identified with the individuals Roberts spoke to and felt collectively guided by her psychic wisdom. Her use of the stage as both a pulpit for promoting Spiritualist beliefs and as a means of comforting members of her audience through personalized spirit messages thus combatted the alienation associated with modern existence. Constructing her psychic mediumship as a means of circulating information on a mass scale, Roberts restructured Guppy's and Fay's performances to engage broader audiences and extend the reach of Spiritualism. As a result, she modified the role of a spirit medium from one grounded in theater to one aligned with modern communications technology.

Born in 1889 in London, Roberts began hearing what she identified as spirit voices at a young age, but did not consider herself to be a medium or join the Spiritualist community until close to the time Anna Eva Fay was ending her career onstage. The death of her first husband in 1920 coincided, she writes, with her realization of her mediumistic sensitivity; soon after she began attending meetings held by the local Spiritualist association, she had a vision of her spirit guide, Red Cloud. Roberts' description of her Native American spirit control, as Steven Connor has noted, continued a long tradition of Spiritualists associating mediums' occult wisdom with an idealized

portrait of a vanished people to validate her insight (*Dumbstruck* 372).³¹ Initially channeling him during séances she held with Spiritualists or for paying sitters, Roberts explains that she soon transitioned to a small public lecture circuit, where she traveled throughout London and Surrey “giving clairvoyance, clairaudience..., healing and trance lectures” (32). Although Roberts continued to hold private séances, it was her career on the stage, spanning nearly half a century until the late 1960s, that brought her international fame and influenced present-day conceptions of mediumship.

As Roberts’ popularity grew in the 1920s and 1930s as a result of the trance lectures she gave at Spiritualist meetings, she began performing in public halls in order to accommodate the increasing crowds. During this time, she appears to have developed what her biographer, Sylvia Barbanell, refers to as her “platform personality,” where she spoke forcefully to her audience, particularly those who expressed skepticism, and “rarely le[ft] an individual until he or she [was] able to understand and accept the spirit description” (15-16). Whereas nineteenth-century Spiritualists contended that the ideal medium efficiently channeled spirit messages as a result of her automatism, Roberts’ adopted the kind of vibrant stage presence Fay had cultivated and made it a central feature of her mediumship. This emphasis on the medium’s “dynamic personality” marks a major shift in Spiritualist constructions of mediumship: despite continuing to claim she

³¹ In addition, invoking the figure of the Native American depicted the knowledge she channeled from him as quaint and authentic in a way that comforted sitters and diffused any tensions that arose during séances. For example, during a moment when “the atmosphere had become charged with emotion,” Red Cloud relayed an anecdote that his spectral attendants had misinterpreted her getting her hair permed at a salon as a moment of great danger to her, warning him that “there are those who would scalp your medium” (Roberts 33). As Connor observes, Roberts’ and her followers’ portrayal of Red Cloud drew upon the “egregiously racist” assumptions structuring British and American conceptions of Native Americans (*Dumbstruck* 372).

acted as an assistant to spirits and “transmit[ed] the messages of others,” Roberts proposed that mediums themselves served as the central spectacle of the public performances (Roberts 93). Rather than merely acting as the vehicles of spirit knowledge, Roberts argued that mediums “have free will to act as they choose” and needed to “freely give... consent” to have the spirits channel information through them. Promoting this viewpoint made it possible for Roberts to combine her seemingly contradictory roles of serving as her spirit guide’s “instrument for the exercise of... divine power” with being an engaging performer as she conversed with her audience (31).

These conversations, during which Roberts presented personal information about audience members’ lost loved ones, formed the central attraction of her lecture circuit; in fact, it was Roberts’ lively onstage personality that drew so many to watch her relay the information she claimed to channel from spirits. Although she spent only a few minutes on each audience member whose questions she answered and was unable to attend to more than a few dozen of them in each performance, the halls in which she performed regularly filled to capacity. Despite her crediting Red Cloud with drawing the crowds, she herself became what Barbanell refers to as “one of the greatest propagandists Spiritualism has produced in nearly a century of history” (14). Insisting she was inundated by missives from spirits who were desperate to speak to their loved ones, Roberts presented messages answering both individuals’ personal questions and larger concerns of the audience about death and the afterlife. Roberts began her shows by giving accounts of individuals whom she claimed were at that moment attempting to contact their family member or friend through her, providing the kind of information Fay did

during her Somnolency act which was likely obtained through assistants' prior research on select members of the audience in the weeks leading up to each performance. Offering evidence of her clairvoyance by providing details that corresponded with the audience member's memories about the deceased person's appearance, unique habits and life experiences, Roberts spoke on subjects that assuaged the individual audience member's private grief, as well as attending to more general concerns that were likely to interest the audience as a whole. While providing messages to a man from his young son who had recently died in a car accident, for example, Roberts drew attention to a tragic story that moved her wider audience while also urging them not to feel grief for the dead, as "they are able to speak to you and are alive" (9, 11). Barbanell's commentary illuminates the theatricality of the clairvoyant revelations which appealed to her audiences: in each performance, "[t]here is the warmth of human contact, the drama of love being reunited across the chasm of death, the display of a variety of emotions" (96). Although most audience members attended the mass séances in the hopes of hearing from the family or friends whose loss they grieved, the majority of them were not selected to receive personal messages; nevertheless, Roberts satisfied the crowds by uniting them in watching the emotional spectacles. To a much greater extent than the lectures mediums gave during the 1860s and 1870s, Roberts' public conversations with individuals about their deeply personal grief and memories forged a community through their affective investment in the messages she relayed.

As her fame rapidly grew during the 1930s, Roberts traveled more extensively throughout England to give performances at various lecture halls and theaters. Her

audiences, Roberts and Barbanell assure their readers, also traveled from afar in the hopes of attending her renowned lectures. Filling venues in London, Manchester and Birmingham during one tour, for example, allowed Roberts to speak to nearly 60,000 people; Barbanell estimates Roberts spoke to 250,000 during a three-year tour of Britain (13, 91). Her tours in effect rendered her a broadcast medium, as she delivered messages from the spirit world to vast audiences spanning all ages and socioeconomic statuses. And although Sconce contends that the spread of broadcast technology like the radio in the twentieth century could have deeply alienating effects which “ultimately reaffirmed the individual listener’s anonymity and isolation,” Roberts’ mediumship disseminated her messages to thousands of listeners across the country in a way that affirmed their connection to them (62). The method of assembling these crowds in one large venue was as critical to uniting this community as the content of the individual messages. Even during the peak of the radio’s popularity in Britain, Roberts insisted on assembling her audiences in mass halls and speaking to them in person, never venturing into radio performances as other mediums later did. At one point, faced with the prospect of having to turn people away at the door of the Victoria Hall in Bloomsbury, Roberts accommodated the overflowing crowd by effectively performing in both of its large rooms at once, linking the two with a microphone (94). While agreeing to use technology to extend the reach of her voice and include as many listeners as possible, Roberts managed the format of her lectures in a way that ensured the personal interaction between her and her audience. While on one hand this guaranteed greater ticket sales for her performances, her in-person transmission of otherworldly messages also preserved the

atmosphere of the séance, where those gathered in the hall communally experienced the emotional and dramatic exchanges. As a result, Roberts expanded the nineteenth-century séance to connect people to Spiritualism on an unprecedented scale.

While communicating messages to individual audience members, Roberts and her biographers were careful to employ the rhetoric used by nineteenth-century Spiritualists when describing her role in the proceedings. Portraying herself in her autobiography as a telephone operator, Roberts writes she performed the role of “receiving and transmitting... messages,” during which time she felt herself “vibrating with the power of the spirit” as it spoke through her (94).³² Her biographer is even more explicit, describing Roberts as “a human wireless set for the inhabitants of another sphere of life” (Barbanell 95-96). Roberts contends she was bombarded by messages from the dead as she began each lecture, so it was necessary for her to efficiently relay messages to the appropriate audience member while devoting part of her attention to receiving new communications (93). Although, as Jill Galvan explains, nineteenth-century Spiritualists who likened mediums to technological apparatuses argued that they channeled messages unconsciously, Roberts’ performances refashioned such conceptions of mediums’ instrumentality. Despite maintaining in her memoirs that during her performances a medium is merely “there to transmit the messages of others and continues to do so for as long as they come, or until her guide calls upon her to stop,” Roberts demonstrated her active involvement in her shows, where she often intervened in the messages, particularly when a spectator’s skepticism threatened to undermine her attempts to convince the

³² As Galvan has demonstrated, the metaphor characterizing a spirit medium as a telephone operator emerged and was widely used in the nineteenth century.

audience of her mediumistic powers (93). Barbanell asserts that what made Roberts such an effective orator was her “tenacity” when delivering “a complicated or involved message” or when an audience member openly doubted the veracity of the message. Pausing in the middle of relaying the message to clarify it, she responded to the individual’s skepticism by “forc[ing] home the evidence... piece by piece.” She also periodically interrupted her delivery of the communications to remind her audience of her trustworthiness. In several instances, she assured them of the impossibility of her having hired plants in the audiences, quipping: “Well, I have given clairvoyance for 16 years, at least once, and usually twice, a week. How much blackmail do you think I would have to pay?” (95). Refuting skeptics and engaging her audience, Roberts challenged cultural conceptions of mediums’ passivity as Guppy and Fay had in their performances. In the process, she also distanced her shows from the overt materialism of their performances, instead emphasizing her transmission of knowledge to collective audiences.

While her stage performances became the mainstay of Roberts’ career, she continued giving private séances with circles consisting of her Spiritualist friends as well as paying customers. Her séances preserved many of the most popular features of those led by Roberts’ predecessors, including materializations of spirits and objects. However, her fame quickly yielded a new type of clientele. In 1937, the writer Douglas Sladen asked her to consult with the Newark-on-Trent police department in order to help them find a ten-year-old girl, Mona Tinsley, whose disappearance had generated national media attention. Although mediums advised the friends and family of missing persons regularly during paid séances, their involvement in an official police investigation was

unusual. The Chief Constable, Mr. Barnes, even mailed Roberts a dress that had belonged to Mona in order to prompt Roberts' clairvoyance, initially obliging her to conduct her psychic investigation remotely. Her secretary's phone call to the Newark police to report that Roberts had claimed she had not only divined the girl's murder but had also had a vision of the murder scene prompted the police to invite her to travel to the site and work with them in person on the case. Accordingly, Roberts made the trip to Newark, where a police escort met her and drove her to where Mona was last seen so she could try to trace the location of the body through her clairvoyant guidance. As Roberts writes, she was allowed to enter a house she found out belonged to the man who was later convicted of Mona's murder and was "[I]eft to roam as [she] pleased" in the hopes of receiving "psychic impressions" (78). After her inspection, she reported to the police that Mona had been killed in the back bedroom: "Death was by strangulation," she revealed. "The murderer then put the body in a sack and left the house by the side door." With that, the police asked her to lead them to the body; as Roberts reported that it was "[s]ome distance from" the house, they all walked together through the churchyard where she "saw that some of the graves had been opened – doubtless by the police, who had been leaving nothing to chance" (79). Although she was unable to tell them anything more definite from there than that the river nearby "holds the secret of the child's whereabouts," and that if they had "dragged it already and found nothing, [they] must drag it again," Roberts believed her spirit guidance during the consultation was verified when the police found Mona's body in a drain weeks later (80).

Such access to an active crime scene and official police investigation was unprecedented for spirit mediums, and united occult practices with forensic science. Roberts divulges that this official consultation was only the first of many, as she was contacted throughout her later career by police as well as journalists who sought her input on unsolved crimes. Writing a story for the *Sunday Pictorial*, John Ridley asked her to consult with the families of two other missing children, thus publicizing her expertise in giving these kinds of investigative psychic readings. While he arranged for her to hold a private séance with the mothers of the children, his article widely disseminated the intimate details of their conversation in which Robert promoted her apparent psychic sensitivity by intuiting the children's deaths and specifying the manner in which they died. This likely drew many readers to the story, and Roberts was careful to emphasize the kind of advice she had provided to audience members during her performances in large halls, comforting the bereaved mothers and in the process proclaiming that spirit mediumship could alleviate the anguish faced by surviving family and friends. After explaining that one girl, Sheila Wilson, had died by strangulation, she assured her mother that "she did not suffer. She was unconscious when she passed" (Roberts 82). By agreeing to have the proceedings of the private consultation published, Roberts used the media to promote mediums' ability to solve mysteries and in the process exploited her clients' private grief. Similar to the way Fay had heightened her visibility as a magician through her silent assistants' disappearance, Roberts maintained her fame through the spectacle of the vanished child.

Roberts continued her private and public consultations into the late 1960s, and her publication of her memoirs in 1969, with several reprintings over the next few decades, circulated her Spiritualist beliefs to millions of people. She acknowledged her use of her book as an extension of her performances in public halls, thus selecting anecdotes to include in it that represented people “from all professions, occupations and varying strata of society – a cross-section, in fact, of humanity” (199). Her choice of these narratives reflected her personal beliefs of Spiritualism’s ability to transcend cultural boundaries, but also ensured its appeal to a broader audience. The memoir therefore served a similar function as her spirit channeling but on a larger scale, as she presented both as capable of uniting audience members and readers through their affective connection to the messages she relayed as well as her engaging performances. Yet even as she aligned herself with electronic media as it became the dominant means of disseminating information on a global scale, she also challenged conceptions about mediums’ presumed unconsciousness.

Although modernizing the format of stage mediumship and aligning it with twentieth-century technologized media, Roberts built her career on the foundation Guppy and Fay had established in their theatrical performances. Guppy’s association of the séance with the materialization of commodities played a substantial role in the development of mediumship as an explicitly commercialized profession. Transferring this performance style to the stage, Fay employed Guppy’s methods to engage large audiences, in the process illuminating the correlation between spirit mediumship and secular magic yet retaining control over her performances by aligning herself with

Spiritualism. Like Guppy, however, Fay achieved fame in large part because of the unseen assistants on whom she depended in demonstrations of her apparent mediumistic gift. Roberts' success similarly entailed the invisibility of her assistants and those whose fates she seemed to divine, underscoring the fact that these women's success often came at the expense of concealing others' labor. Nonetheless, by combining spirit mediumship's theatricality with her formulation of it as an embodied broadcast technology, Roberts expanded the circulation of these women's work. As a result, Roberts' as well as Guppy's and Fay's contributions were instrumental in molding modern representations of spirit mediumship and stage performance.

Chapter Five

Assembly Required: Women's Automatic Writing and the Production of Print Media

On a sweltering summer day in 1912 in St. Louis, Missouri, three women gathered around a Ouija board with the hope of contacting the dead. Successful in their endeavor and intrigued by the messages sent through, Emily Hutchings and Pearl Curran returned home from their visit with the neighbor's Ouija board in tow to continue the otherworldly correspondence. Meeting occasionally thereafter to obtain messages from the beyond as the spirits guided their hands on the planchette, the two persisted in their efforts to establish regular communications with a control spirit for more than a year, but to no avail. However, in the late spring of 1913, the women's hands were directed to record a repetitive but incomprehensible message: "P-a-t-c," the board spelled out. "P-a-t-c. P-a-t-c...." Yet the message stopped short here, baffling the Ouija board users. Finally, on July 8 of that year, the spirit completed her first message. With greater energy than usual, an unseen force pushed Curran's and Hutching's hands to carve the planchette across the board: "'Many moons ago I lived. Again I come – Patience Worth my name'" (Prince 32-3).

This announcement initiated communications between the prolific spirit and Curran, who came to mediate Worth's messages, that spanned more than two decades and totaled nearly four million words before Curran's death in 1937 (Diliberto 84). While such an output far exceeded that of other mediums, the speed with which these works were produced as well as their widespread distribution supported the primary goals of the

Spiritualist movement: to obtain and disseminate spirits' wisdom to as many people as possible. Spiritualists claimed that spectral guides employed various methods of producing textual messages, with some spirit writing occurring directly, where it was inspired by the medium's presence but occurred independently of her physical intervention. By the late nineteenth century, however, most spirit writing was transmitted through a medium, who hand-recorded messages via pen, the typewriter or Ouija board. As scholars including Jill Galvan and Lisa Gitelman have observed, women's participation in automatic writing during this era coincided with their increasing employment as typists and telegraph operators. Galvan in particular assesses the characterization of women who performed communications mediumship as automatized instruments; such an association affirmed their efficiency as well as their lack of interference in forming the content of messages (65).

Automatic writers necessarily rejected claims to authorship of the texts: casting their bodies as spirits' recording instruments for otherworldly communications, they perpetuated the cultural fiction of their automaticity. They instead displayed their conjuring skills by characterizing their writing as a collaboration with their spirit controls, who dictated their messages to passive but uniquely gifted mediums. Sarah Edwards, Bette London and Helen Sword have each contended that automatic writing complicates understandings of textual production and authorship; London argues that women's automatic writing demonstrates "authorship has been – and can be – configured differently" to include collaborative practices (30). However, in the prefaces to their texts, automatic writers represent any concerns on their part about authorial attribution as

secondary to their desire to accurately convey the advice, histories and fictional works transmitted through their pens or the Ouija board. Portraying their published texts as the verbatim transcripts of spirit messages, they in turn characterized their role as that of a proxy for specters guiding their inscription.

Although historians and literary critics have studied the relationship of mediums' automatic writing to authorship, these otherworldly communications reveal their engagement in the construction of the texts on a much broader level. Published automatic writing obtained through the Ouija board, with a pen or on the typewriter destabilizes the boundaries of print media, often blending genres in imaginative ways. The texts undermine understandings of automatic writing as "say[ing] nothing of thought or inwardness, of intention or understanding," as they reveal mediums' engagement with the content of the messages even as they denied their creative contributions to them (Kittler 228). Women's preparation of these unique works for publication problematizes understandings of their role as unconscious instruments of their spirit controls, and such constructions conceal their involvement in their production. Their participation extended far beyond mere authorship and encompassed their composition of prefatory statements to guide readers' interpretation of the texts, experiencing and recording the visions related by spirits and persuading publishers that their automatic writing deserved a place in the literary market. It is through their automatic writing that mediums claimed a role in the publication and marketing of these works, in the process broadening the scope of Spiritualist publishing.

While the texts formed a significant portion of Spiritualist publications between World War I and World War II, until the interwar years this literary market was dominated by periodicals such as the *Spiritualist* (1869-1882), the *Medium and Daybreak* (1870-1895), and W.T. Stead's short-lived but influential *Borderland* (1893-1897; Oppenheim 44-47). Beth Palmer notes that opportunities for women's involvement in the conventional publishing industry increased during the 1860s and 1870s, and this seems to have been particularly the case in the Spiritualist periodical press, where women such as Emma Hardinge Britten and Ada Goodrich Freer advanced to the editorship of *Two Worlds* and the assistant editorship of *Borderland*, respectively (Palmer 3; Oppenheim 47). Yet as in the secular press, these roles were for the most part infrequently filled by women, as Victorians regarded successful editors as embodying "qualities ... most achievable for a well-connected and well-educated man of the middle or upper classes" (Palmer 6). Although Spiritualists largely proclaimed their support for the early women's rights movement, women remained underemployed in the Spiritualist publishing industry throughout the late nineteenth century. Numerous mediums became authors through the publication of their autobiographies, but it was only in the early twentieth century, when they began publishing the automatic writing they had recorded, that greater numbers of women played a direct role in the publication process for Spiritualist literature. While a comprehensive study of women's involvement in Spiritualist publishing, or even of the Spiritualist literary marketplace as a whole, has yet to be completed, Oppenheim counts more than a dozen periodicals circulating by the First World War, with at least five attracting a readership large enough to sustain decades of publishing; Helen Sword

observes “an unprecedented boom in otherworldly messages and books about spirit communication” during the interwar years (44; 15). By World War II, the publication of mediums’ automatic writing, London contends, became “more the rule than the exception” (168). The large-scale distribution of these works by Spiritualist publishing companies such as Creative Age Press as well as mainstream presses including Alfred A. Knopf and Henry Holt and Company made mediums virtual celebrities within the Spiritualist community. As a result, the automatic writers expanded opportunities for women’s professional roles within the Spiritualist publishing industry at the same time that they refashioned the production of literature.

Their involvement in the publication of automatic writing became a new feature of women’s mediumship at the turn of the century, one that served as a source of authority for them both in the séance room and the Spiritualist publishing industry. Unlike the few women like Britten and Freer who obtained editorial positions at journals, automatic writing mediums had more opportunities for involvement in the compilation and publication of their writing, but ostensibly less control over its content in accordance with their attribution of the messages to spirits. Although Friedrich Kittler dismisses such writing as eliminating “[t]he ordinary, purposeful use of language – so-called communication with others,” these texts in fact were designed for the widespread distribution of communications otherwise limited to audiences in private séances or at public halls (229). This writing has posed a challenge to critics who have sought to evaluate or interpret the often fragmented and unintelligible prose through a traditional

literary analysis. By approaching the writing with a media studies perspective, however, I aim to illuminate these women's contributions to the history of print media.

Women's channeling and recording of spirit messages in effect rendered them print media apparatuses, and their work alongside fellow mediums and other Spiritualists to construct the documents reformulated literary production. Structuring writing as a technologized process, they assembled and disseminated modern texts whose mixture of genres and media reflect their uniquely collaborative production. Although the texts' abstruse content has made them susceptible to critical neglect, they warrant consideration as a result of their destabilization of the boundary between unconscious writing and expressive literature. In collecting their automatic writing and preparing it for publication, mediums including Perrin and Walter, Hutchings, Curran, and Stewart problematized Romantic notions of writing and authorship while also challenging historical limitations on women's authoritative roles in the publishing industry.

Scribbling Women: The Advent of Automatic Writing and Ouija Board Communications

Spirit writing can be traced back to Kate and Margaret Fox's first communication with spirits in their home in 1848. As the news spread about their paranormal conversations through "spirit-rapping," where the conjured ghosts spelled out their answers to the sisters' questions through a series of knocks corresponding to the alphabet, the Spiritualist movement was born. Jeffrey Sconce observes that these exchanges resembled telegraphic technology rather than the production of textual inscription (24). Yet the emphasis on the translation of spirits' messages into the standard alphabet so they

could be understood by and disseminated to as many people as possible also paved the way for the advent of automatic writing just over a decade later. While this writing consisted of both human-mediated and spirits' direct writing, believers considered a medium's ability to inspire the latter the more impressive demonstration of her powers (Owen 41). During instances of slate writing, which garnered public attention particularly in the 1870s, séance-goers sat passively as pencils or chalk wrote messages on paper or slates seemingly under the direction of spirit forces.³³ Printed images of slate writing, some including sketches of control spirits and others an assortment of handwriting, suggest the potential for spirit writing to disrupt disciplinary boundaries. James Owen's *Psychography*, for instance, contains facsimiles of several examples of this writing so as to exhibit their variety; while images of writing in several languages are shown so as to validate Spiritualists' claim that they could only have been obtained through spirit contact, they also demonstrate the ways automatic writing figured print media as both a communications tool and an aesthetic form (Figure 5.1).

Spiritualists' emphasis on the astonishing speed with which sitters obtained inscriptions, where they materialized all at once within the space of several minutes, attests to their association of their beliefs and practices with modernity. As with new media technologies that had emerged during the last half of the nineteenth century, this

³³ The psychical researcher William Crookes reported in 1874 to have witnessed such a spectacle, recounting that a "luminous hand came down from the upper part of the room, and after hovering near a sheet of paper, threw the paper down, and then rose up over our heads, gradually fading into darkness." Although Crookes noted that Kate Fox was present when the spirit writing occurred, he also insisted she did not play any direct role in the writing itself – an assertion that was verified, he contended, by "the most rigid test conditions" (93).

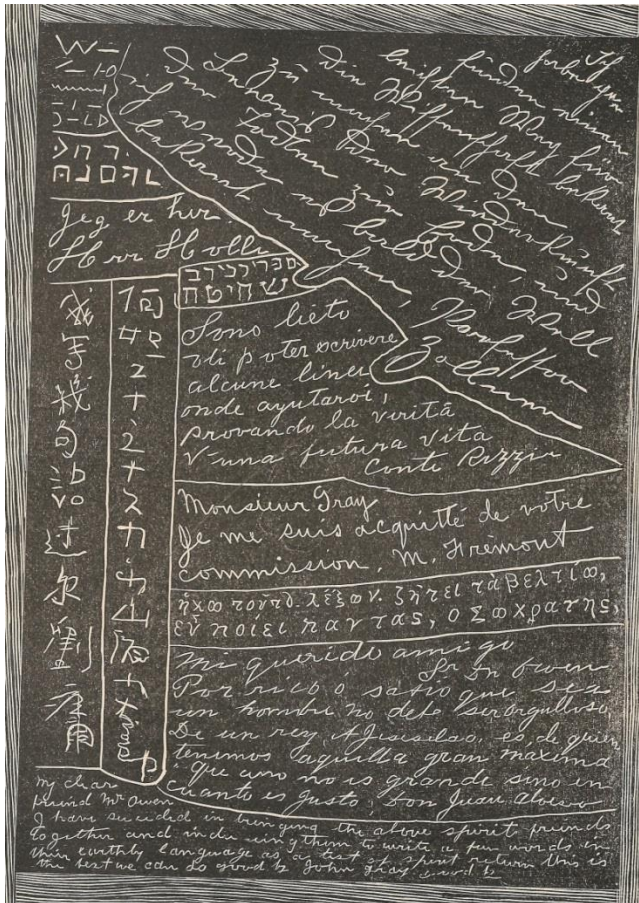


Fig. 5.1. Slate writing in various languages.

otherworldly communications system created the potential for the “accelerated knowledge production” Richard Menke writes helped define Victorian culture during an age of technological innovation (6). Spiritualist author and editor James Owen marveled at séance-goers having “received as many as fourteen slates at one sitting, . . . all written in a few minutes’ time. . . . [T]he writing is . . . apparently thrown or impressed upon the slate, vastly more rapidly than it could possibly be written by mortal hand” (15-16). Rather than being confined to the séance room and individual sitters’ memories as aural spirit communications were, the wisdom inscribed on slates could, through the use of emerging technologies such as the facsimile, be recorded and disseminated to thousands, if not

millions of readers. Likewise, the simultaneous production of a great number of slates at a time, with the script “thrown or impressed upon” them in a way that resembles the action of a printing press, calls attention to spirit writing’s function as an alternative form of media technology. Attributing to disembodied spirits the performance of mechanical labor to convey information with the rapidity desired by a modernizing society, Spiritualists promoted the practice as uniquely responsive to Victorians seeking the affirmation of spiritual beliefs while at the same time desiring technological advancement.

Despite its popularity in séances until the 1870s, direct spirit writing was gradually overshadowed by mediated automatic writing throughout the later nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries (Owen 41). As séance mediums instead devoted their energy to producing spectral materializations, they also began privately recording messages they claimed to have written under the direction of spirits. Because this type of spirit writing could be performed alone, it presented advantages as well as risks to the writer, particularly to female mediums: Alex Owen reports several of the women acknowledged having to be careful not to become addicted to such an activity, in addition to making efforts to ensure indecent messages would not slip through if a malevolent spirit began guiding the writing (213-215).³⁴ Their exertion of such discipline in the midst of unconsciously channeling spirit messages appears to undermine Spiritualists’ and psychical researchers’ insistence on mediums’ lack of interfering

³⁴ Owen also notes psychologists’ association of automatic writing, and particularly the production of what were deemed indecent messages, with hysteria (214-215). For a closer look at the relationship between theories of the unconscious and hysteria, see Galvan.

consciousness throughout this writing. However, as Galvan explains, “Automatism did not altogether deny knowledge; it simply split it, conceptually speaking, into conscious and unconscious forms” (66). Indeed, William Crookes reports the application of this theorization in his observation of Kate Fox’s automatic writing during a séance in the 1870s: “I have been with Miss Fox when she has been writing a message automatically to one person present, whilst a message to another person on another subject was being given alphabetically by means of ‘raps,’ and the whole time she was conversing freely with a third person on a subject totally different from either” (95). Crookes’ description of this event implicitly draws upon contemporaneous theories of perception and attention to validate Spiritualists’ claims that automatic writing was produced by mediums’ channeling of spirits while the medium mentally absented herself during the transmission of the messages. As Jonathan Crary explains, psychologists considered attention to involve “some process of perceptual or mental organization in which a limited number of objects or stimuli are isolated from a larger background of possible attractions” (24). With her attention devoted to her conversation, Crookes suggests, it could not have been possible for Fox to consciously direct her simultaneous writing or “rapping,” seemingly demonstrating the necessity for spirits’ direction of Fox’s writing as she was otherwise occupied.³⁵

³⁵ For further analysis of constructions of mediums’ unconsciousness in relation to automatic writing, see Galvan and Oppenheim. Oppenheim discusses theories of ideomotor activity and unconscious cerebration, to which psychologists such as William Benjamin Carpenter attributed automatic writing (242-3).

Although automatic and direct spirit writing were widely practiced in the last half of the nineteenth century, it was not until the early twentieth century that mediums began publishing book-length compilations of it in large numbers. The origins of such a shift toward the mass distribution of what Spiritualists described as spirit-authored texts can be located in the invention and popularization of the Ouija board, which provided mediums and sitters alike the opportunity to receive otherworldly messages rapidly yet in a systematic manner. First invented in 1886 and marketed as a “talking board” before being patented by Elijah Bond in 1891, the Ouija board combined the planchette – a small wooden board with a pencil attached used by French Spiritualists in the 1860s and 1870s – and a larger board to allow users to slide the planchette over the alphabet, numbers and pre-printed words “yes,” “no,” and “goodbye” (“The New ‘Planchette’”; Johnson 1; Figure 5.2).³⁶ Calling it a “Ouija or Egyptian Luck-board,” Bond described the board as “a toy or game [with] which two or more persons can amuse themselves by asking questions of any kind and having them answered by the device used and operated by the touch of the hand, so that the answers are designated by letters on a board” (Figure 5.3). In spite of his labeling the board “a toy or game,” Bond’s careful omission of the agent behind the device’s answers in his description encouraged Spiritualists’ claims that spirits crafted the messages.³⁷ William Fuld subsequently formed a production factory to

³⁶ Although traditional histories of the Ouija board name Bond as its inventor, Eugene Orlando and Robert Murch recently discovered that the board had been invented five years before his patent; however, scholars remain uncertain as to the identity of the inventor. I am grateful to Orlando for directing me to this revised historical account in a private communication. For more information, see museumoftalkingboards.com/history.html.

³⁷ Indeed, Fuld’s 1892 patent exploited this ambiguity, explaining that the planchette moved “by the involuntary players, or through some other agency” (“Game Apparatus”).

manufacture large numbers of the board, representing it as a tool with which one could contact the dead. This marketing strategy attracted Spiritualists as well as thrill-seeking non-believers to the board; Fuld openly denied any Spiritualist beliefs, and although countless mediums used the boards in their séance parlors, they constituted only a fraction of Ouija consumers (Johnson 2). The mass production and distribution of the boards, the assembly-line nature of which is echoed in their design, nevertheless transformed automatic writing and Spiritualist mediumship, extending a mediating role to those who were intrigued by the occult but did not claim paranormal capabilities.

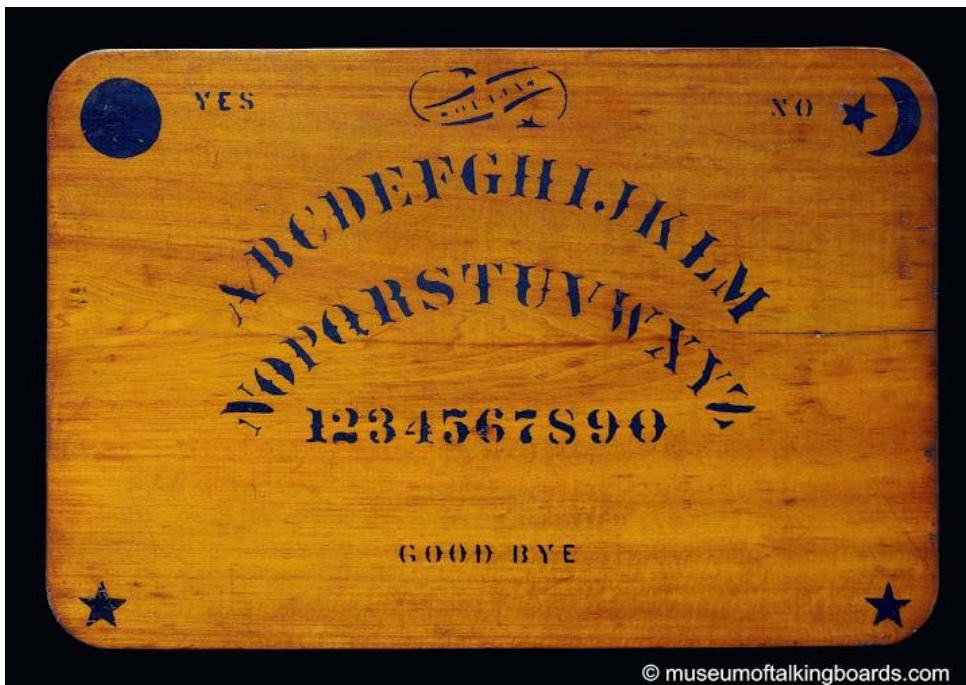


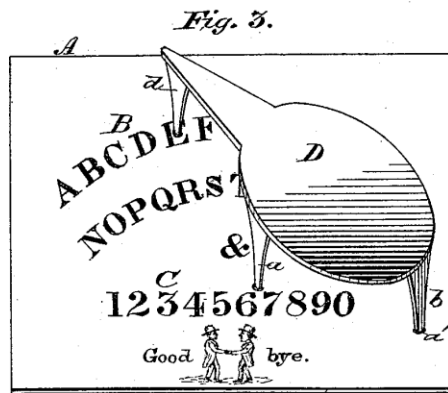
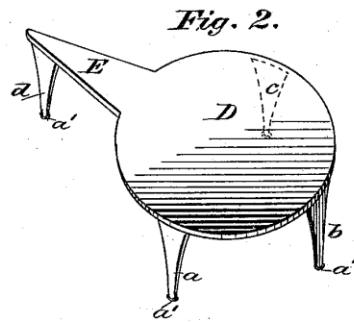
Fig. 5.2. An early Ouija board design by Kennard Novelty Company. (Reproduced by kind permission of Gene Orlando, *Museum of Talking Boards*).

(No Model.)

E. J. BOND.
TOY OR GAME.

No. 446,054.

Patented Feb. 10, 1891.



Witnesses:
Frank A. ...
H. R. Waller

Inventor:
Elijah J. Bond
 By *J. C. ...*
 Attorney.

Fig. 5.3. Bond's drawing of the "Ouija or Egyptian Luck-Board" for his patent of the game (U.S. Patent Office).

Rather than gathering around a private medium in her séance parlor as had those who watched spirit writing materialize, Ouija board users could now gather at any location they deemed amenable to spirit contact and, through their collective use of the planchette, receive messages without an intermediary. Such a shift toward collective, unrestricted contact with the dead had a profound effect on spirit mediumship: although Spiritualists maintained their conviction that mediums were uniquely able to establish such communications and were specially chosen by the spirits to do so, Ouija boards allowed for occult enthusiasts to contact spirits directly and diffused the transmission of messages among several participants. Despite Spiritualism's origins as a populist movement, its depiction of mediums as psychically gifted implicitly privileged them. With each participant equally privy to the spirits' messages, the Ouija board in effect democratized the practice of spirit mediumship and allowed users to help decode opaque messages, a task usually reserved for mediums. As it was widely available, the Ouija board therefore increased the potential for users to mediate spirit messages rather than merely act as spectators during séances. The numerous published works of spirits' Ouija board missives indicate that sitters' direct participation in these communications increased interest in and general awareness of the Spiritualist movement, whether the Ouija amanuenses claimed or disavowed their faith in its tenets. Publishing their own transcripts of automatic writing dictated by their spirit controls alongside Ouija recordings, established mediums continued to attract greater attention for their paranormal texts. Their handwritten messages as well as Ouija board publications revised

Spiritualist publishing practices and necessitate a reconsideration of authorship and literary production.

Women's involvement in publishing automatic writing thus initiated a new role for spirit mediums, extending their authority to the Spiritualist publishing profession. Whereas managing positions had been largely restricted to men and a few elite women during the proliferation of periodicals in the nineteenth century, the publication of automatic writing allowed greater numbers of mediums to work directly in this industry. Often involved in the process from the moment they began recording the messages to the final stages of marketing the texts, these women took on roles that extended beyond the authorship critics such as Sarah Edwards and Bette London ascribe to them. By contracting with Alfred A. Knopf, for example, the medium Edith Ellis obtained an introduction to her text, which contained communications with the spirit Winifred Brandon, by the architect and Spiritualist author Claude Bragdon; his endorsement helped publicize her work widely enough to initiate a second printing only months after it was first released. Pearl Curran's series of publications of the writing she claimed to obtain through her spirit guide Patience Worth became so popular that she moved from publisher Henry Holt to the Dorset Press. And although John Wilson writes in the introduction to Walter Franklin Pearce's biography of Curran that public interest in her writings dissipated after the 1920s, for a time they sold well enough to spawn the Patience Worth Publishing Company, which sold Curran's fourth and final book (8). These mediums therefore made use of their writing as an avenue into the production,

marketing and dissemination of spiritual messages, remaining closely involved throughout the publication process.

Whereas direct spirit writing and most of the automatic writing composed by mediums consisted of their inscription of what Spiritualists had earlier claimed was the spirits' unique handwriting, automatic writing via the Ouija board disrupted this process. Unlike the mixture of languages, forms of art and types of media that psychographers exhibited in images they circulated of spirit writing, the Ouija board's standardized English alphabet and layout predetermined the aesthetic boundaries of the messages participants transcribed. In a process that essentially reversed that of moveable type, but rendered messages ephemeral until hand-recorded by an observer, participants obtained messages by moving the planchette across a board with preformed letters and symbols. Such a design encouraged the frequent use of the boards and rapid production of messages, transforming the individual work of inscribing often long messages into shared labor. In doing so, it associated this type of automatic writing with factory-line production, the inscribed product of the Ouija board necessarily conforming to a relatively standard format and arising from an efficient division of labor. Aesthetically, Ouija board writing thus presented a stark contrast to the more complex forms of slate writing, as the latter allowed for the inclusion of various images and forms of text (Figure 5.4). Representing the Ouija board as a technology with which to obtain a greater yield of spiritual insight, Ouija writers ushered in an era of novel-length spirit messages which could in turn be printed and widely disseminated for readers' consumption.

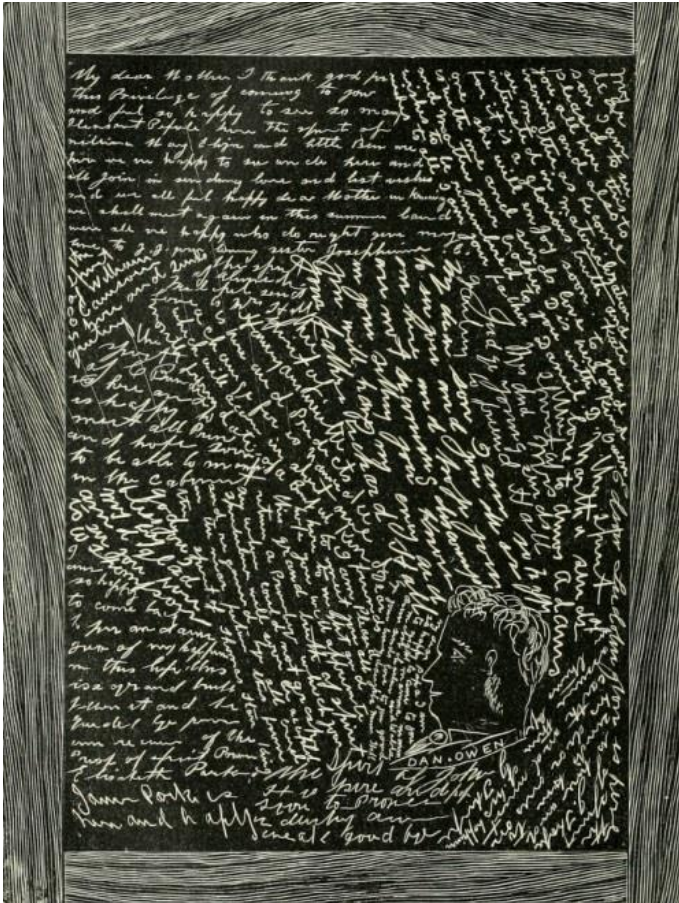


Fig. 5.4. Example of the varied forms of psychography séance mediums composed on slates, in contrast to the Ouija Board, whose form restricted the type of writing that could be produced. (Ouija board image reproduced by kind permission of Gene Orlando, *Museum of Talking Boards*.)



However, despite its standardized format, the works published and advertised as compiled through the Ouija board in fact destabilize earlier conceptions about automatic writing as well as literary conventions. Comprising an array of materials, ranging from short treatises on the proper use of the Ouija board and recordings of spirit communications through it, to lengthy novels narrated by individual spirit controls to mediums, the publications exemplify mediums' appropriation of what initially had been marketed as an object of entertainment for lengthy communications with spirits that could be easily recorded and arranged for printing. Ouija recordings offer unique interpretations of what constitutes publishable writing, with participants considering the guidance and tales contained within the texts relevant to a wide readership. They also reveal Ouija writers' collective work in prompting messages through their questions and the process of recording them together; as Devin Johnston observes, these writers "take dictation while interpreting and shaping it and interpolate their interpretations into the text" (117)³⁸. Yet Ouija writers insisted on their lack of creative involvement in the construction of the texts; as two mediums asserted in their own Ouija-inspired article, "what we receive, dictated as fast as an amanuensis can take it down, we do not change in any way" (Perrin and Walters 3). While the use of the planchette to painstakingly mark out and record each letter forming the messages would seem to be a lengthy procedure, mediums in fact emphasized the speed with which they produced what they characterized as rote transcriptions of spirits' dictation. Their mediumship thus aligned literary production

³⁸ Johnston refers specifically here to James Merrill's composition of *The Changing Light at Sandover* through the Ouija board with his longtime partner David Jackson, which was begun in the early 1950s and published in three volumes in the 1970s (99-127).

itself with industrial manufacturing, “inspir[ing] fantasies of literary automation” much like scholar Anthony Enns asserts typewritten automatic writing did (67). Designating the Ouija board as a recording device that united a typewriter’s efficiency with a tool facilitating supernatural communications, mediums characterized their participation as a facet of industrial production.

Configuring this literature in such a way resulted in texts blending various genres of fiction and non-fiction, often containing religious, scientific, psychological, historical and literary material within the same work. Among the earlier texts published is *The Secret of the Successful Use of the Ouija Board*, recorded by the mediums Clarisse Perrin and Nellie Walters on a Ouija board they initially bought to entertain their families during an Alaskan winter. The document comprises a unique mixture of genres, although its length totals only a fraction of that of contemporaneous Ouija works. Consisting of a treatise with “lectures” on the “practical, illuminating, simplified solution of the eternal questions of the ages” and an explanation of the process through which spirits transmit them, the article initially serves as a means of proselytizing to a mass audience (3). As it develops, though, the document becomes a collection of imaginative statements by various spirit controls on the history and even the everyday life of the Ouija board, which is personified in the account. Signaling the extensive variety of subjects and writing styles Ouija board communications made possible, these messages reimagine the history of its invention and use, creating a backstory resembling a fairy tale for children.

Announcing it will explain “what power drives the little heart shaped table of the Ouija,” the spirit control Perrin and Walters cite as the author of one segment guides their

tracing of the letters on the board to record its purported history (8). According to the narrative,

God did inspire and ordain [the inventor] to make this modern Planchette and he sells it.... A tiny elf is instrumental in manipulating the board. The magnetism of the mortals using the board will tell the tiny spirit, or Tom Thumb, who is a dwarf and pushes the table about on the letters, that they wish to talk to the Heavenly spirits. (8-9)

On the one hand portrayed as a story to entertain children, the narrative also symbolizes the medium's role in spirit communications. The personification of the planchette as "Tom Thumb" signifies the way the Ouija board in effect served as an extension of a spirit medium by becoming the means of communication between humans and specters; its childlike features represent mediums' seeming passivity and ingenuousness.

Portraying mediumship as the equivalent of being an instrument like a Ouija board, Perrin and Walter suggest the value of their text lies in its transcription of divine wisdom rather than creative inspiration. Although dictated to adults operating the planchette, the story demonstrates that the structure of Ouija board writing could allow for a degree of latitude in its composition that could render it appealing to readers of varying ages, beliefs and interests. The combination of genres and writing styles made this writing marketable to a broad audience and challenged traditional conventions about writing, making it difficult to classify it within established genres.

Perrin's and Walter's occasional interjections in their text also indicate their collaborative effort to promote parts of the work as suitable for young readers seeking imaginative narratives. In a short preface to the section "Ouija's Story of His Own Daydream Life," the mediums explain that this story "was given on the board one

evening, simply to amuse the children of the household” (10). What follows is an unconventional narrative of the personified “Ouija” detailing his idyllic life in a fairy tale setting, where he is awakened by “morning glories ring[ing] out their bells to tell Ouija it is morning,” after which he breakfasts on honeysuckle and dallies among scenes of nature before concluding his busy day by “pray[ing] for eternal love and patience” and “rid[ing] on the back of a comet to Earth” (10-11). Presented by Perrin and Walters as a charming children’s story, the text combines fantasy fiction with elements of children’s religious tracts, with the collaborative nature of Perrin’s and Walter’s work reflected by its hybrid structure. The narrative quickly reveals that its inclusion within the larger article serves to supplement or even initiate young readers’ religious education, describing at one point Ouija’s communion with the “fairy spirits of God” whose reward for him for his efforts to “cheer the hearts of the helpless and unhappy” is to bring him “back to the starry Heavens, where [he] can kiss the feet of Jesus and receive His thanks for the evening’s labor.” It also reinforces the mediums’ promotion of their use of the Ouija board as a device with which they received spiritual guidance, dispelling concerns religious leaders had raised about its potential use for diabolical purposes.³⁹ The mediums’ recording and distribution of this text therefore revises literary and publishing conventions, offering a work that blends genres and forms of Spiritualist and religious literature to promote Spiritualist beliefs.

³⁹ According to Bill Ellis, such concerns circulated ever since the invention of the Ouija board, but increased in the 1910s and 1920s (181).

The Secret of the Successful Use of the Ouija Board demonstrates the ways automatic writing, even that obtained on the Ouija board, reimagined literature and its production. While unable to claim credit as authors of the allegedly supernaturally-penned works, Perrin's and Walter's collaboration generated a work that appealed to Spiritualists and shifted the emphasis in Spiritualist publishing from mediums' autobiographical narratives popular in the nineteenth-century to an array of imaginative texts. By publishing their Ouija board writing, Perrin and Walter also disclaimed their authorial agency but highlighted their role in assembling and disseminating the writing, establishing a new avenue for mediums' participation in publishing. Aligning this participation with the mechanistic process of Ouija board transcription, these women refigured modern practices of mediumship as well as writing.

Mark Twain's Supernatural Revival: Composing Novels on the Ouija Board

Works of fiction women mediated through the Ouija board demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between their role and concepts of collaborative authorship. While mediums' function as recorders warranted their physical inscription of these works, in contrast to observers of slate writing, Ouija transcriptionists also often shared responsibility for copying down and deciphering the texts with several other participants. Such was the case with Emily Hutchings and her circle of Ouija participants, consisting of Hutchings' husband and the medium Lola Hays, who collectively transcribed a work they claimed had been relayed through the Ouija board by Mark

Twain.⁴⁰ In her introduction to *Jap Herron: A Novel Written from the Ouija Board*, Hutchings portrays a collaborative working relationship among the three in a way that resembles an assembly line production, where they carefully divided their labor so each member performed a specific set of tasks during the writing process. In doing so, Hutchings associates the group's automatic writing with industrial modernity, drawing attention to the efficiency with which they accumulated the messages for its mass distribution. Mrs. Hays devoted her energy to conjuring the spirit of Twain, and made sure to avoid glancing at the Ouija board during sessions lest "her own mind interfere with the transmission" (11). With her husband copying onto paper the letters she read aloud from the board while Twain guided her hands on the planchette, Hutchings assumed the dual role of comprehending the meaning of the fragmented lettering and vocalizing the spirit's missive. Although Hutchings' role most closely resembled that of automatic writers, where she served as the instrument recording the spirit's words, the successful transmission of the message occurred only if each participant carefully completed his or her task so that, as she recounts, "the three of us developed swiftly into a smoothly working machine" (11-12). She admits Mrs. Hays explained to her that Twain had contacted the famous medium several years prior to her assembling their Ouija group and announced he would "transmit stories through her, if she could find just the right person to sit with her at the transmission board," indicating Hutchings' initially

⁴⁰ Given Twain's disdain for Spiritualism during his life, his paranormal authorship is surprising. However, as Helen Sword remarks, his beyond-the-grave communications might have served as a way for Hutchings and other Spiritualists to obtain "implicit recantations" of his earlier skepticism (43).

secondary role in the proceedings. Yet his characterization of her as “the one for whom he and Mrs. Hays had been waiting,” as he “had found [in her] the negative side of the mysterious human mechanism” points to the two women’s shared mediumistic attributes and capabilities (4). Recalling Spiritualists’ and psychical researchers’ representation of mediumship as a type of “living technolog[y],” his description affirms Hutchings’ ability in particular to refrain from consciously interfering in the production of Twain’s work on the basis of her automaticity (Sconce 40). Her inclusion of this exchange therefore supports her claims throughout the introduction that this work is an authentic copy of Twain’s words, where her accuracy as a transcriptionist is verified by her association with a modern recording instrument.

According to Bette London, collaborations such as Hutchings’ and Hays’ with the spirit of Twain illustrates that “mediumship constitutes a practice of authorship” (22). However, Hutchings, like other automatic writers, portrays the Twain coterie’s and particularly her own role as primarily concentrated on publicizing Twain’s posthumous tales and thereby extending his literary authority after death (22). Rather than refusing the title of Author solely to verify the authenticity of the beyond-the-grave pronouncements, Hutchings suggests in her introduction that neither she nor Mrs. Hays depended upon this attribution, for “Our literary output is well known.” In fact, she goes to great lengths to distance their own writing from that of Twain’s spirit: “not even the severest psychological critic,” she avers, “could assert that it bears any resemblance to the literary style of ‘Jap Herron’” (5). Instead, Hutchings intimates that the writing mediums served as both human recording instruments and literary agents to the departed. She reports that

Twain called upon her in particular “to give his book to the world”; these words appear to have compelled her to ready the work for the printing press by typing the manuscript of her dictation from the Ouija board (19). Including the introduction to the novel allowed her to explain the trio’s methodology of recording Twain’s words, thereby constructing Twain’s spirit’s public persona in a way that draws upon popular conceptions of Twain as he was in life. Hutchings explains it was clear to her and Mrs. Hays when another spirit would attempt to gain control of the planchette and begin tracing its own story, as Twain’s writing style and “individuality ha[ve] been revealed to us in ways which could leave no question in our minds” of the famous author’s identity (4). Her inclusion of Twain’s spirit’s instructions and direct manner of speech, for example when he admonishes the two women for discussing the meaning of his colloquialisms or Hutchings’ husband for smoking a low-quality brand of tobacco, more than just provides readers humorous anecdotes: she signals the ways their Ouija communications allowed for Twain’s authentic authorial voice to continue to be relayed to his readers. In doing so, she constructs the role of automatic writers as providing spirit authors with the ability to continue producing creative works and thereby establish an alternative postmortem legacy. Their collective reimagining of Twain’s authorial style subsequently inspired hybrid texts that anticipated the development of fan fiction, a genre critics have traditionally located within the context of 1930s science fiction (Coppa 42). Despite Hutchings’ insistence that the writing the group published emanated from Twain himself, *Jap Herron* suggests Ouija board writing was in fact a forerunner of this genre and problematizes notions of authorship much in the way fan fiction does.

Although Hutchings insists in her introduction that she and the other séance participants avoided editing the content and structure of Twain's dictations at his behest, she also indicates she collaborated with him to revise the text, where she read Twain's prose back to him and he offered corrections. In spite of Twain's instructions that the women refrain from "correct[ing] my grammar" or "try[ing] to smooth it out" by substituting polite euphemisms for profanities, Hutchings writes that he also explained they would have a degree of editorial control, as "[t]here will be minor errors that you will be able to take care of" (4). As such, the process necessitated the women's "interpretation," which Twain praised as "excellent" (6). Hutchings' and Hays' attention to Twain's wishes that they interfere as little as possible in the development and revision of his work exemplifies their formulation of Ouija mediumship as a communications technology capable of reviving and extending a celebrated author's literary legacy. Set in the Ozarks, *Jap Herron* contains many lines of dialogue "in the speech of the natives," Hutchings explains, consisting of "words that we had never heard," in addition to being written in a humorous style which she claims resembles Twain's (6). Portraying their working relationship as one where she and Mrs. Hays merely facilitated the transmission of the story by an outside personality who was "dependent on us for his means of communication, but wholly independent of our thought and knowledge," Hutchings maintains that the women's collaboration did not equate to their intervention in relaying Twain's messages (8-9). Within such a formulation, they served as components within a mechanized writing process, their

minimal editing a facet of a modern literary technology that privileged efficiency over content.

Presenting a narrative that falls within defined generic boundaries to a much greater degree than *The Secret of the Successful Use of the Ouija Board*, Jap Herron betrays no hint of having been composed on a Ouija board, and without Hutchings announcing this in the subtitle and introduction, readers would likely have never deduced it. Her efforts to make the story of its composition known indicate her confidence that a novel with such a unique production history would draw a larger readership; likewise, its overall cohesion in plot, themes and characterizations supported the Ouija group's aims of demonstrating that the board could allow authors to circumvent laws of nature preventing postmortem writing. In contrast to Hutchings' promotion of the plot in the introduction as exemplary of Twain's authorial genius, the plot attests to the conventionality that the Ouija board's design encouraged, featuring a standard sentimental storyline and generally bearing little resemblance to Twain's works. Yet Hutchings also appeared well aware of the potential for such a plotline to increase its marketability, as she expresses her and Hays' immediate attachment to the novel's protagonists and their emotional responses to tragic or uplifting events that befall the characters, and expresses her anticipation that readers will similarly find it engaging. Her interpretation of the text's merit therefore is closely associated with her confidence in its ability to appeal to a variety of readers through its uplifting tale. While contemporaneous and modern-day critics alike have been dismissive of the novel's literary merit, such a plotline is the result of the collaborative work that went into its unique production by the

Ouija board writers. Its imitative quality points to Hutchings' own investment in publishing and marketing the novel as an authentic extension of Twain's writing, as she and her colleagues aimed to demonstrate that Ouija board recordings such as *Jap Herron* offered a way for celebrated authors to continue to connect with their readers even after death.

Rather than revealing spiritual "truths" about the afterlife as was the focus of much automatic writing, *Jap Herron's* plot about a young orphan who grows up to be the beloved editor of his town's newspaper engages contemporaneous concerns about rural poverty. Emulating Twain's inclusion of relevant social commentary in his fiction, the novel critiques issues that were contentious in the nineteenth century but which attracted even more public attention in the years after his death in 1910, particularly debates on alcohol consumption. In its portrayal of two characters' alcoholism, it deploys a common narrative trope of temperance fiction in which addiction results in impoverishment and moral decrepitude, where the character faces a choice between "either recovery and moral transformation or abjection and death" (Zieger 37). Whereas Jap's close friend Bill Bowers secures readers' sympathy by triumphing over his addiction to lead a happy and productive life, Jap's mother is consigned to the latter route, abandoning Jap at a young age and returning years later in a drunken stupor to publicly shame him before dying. Its condemnation of Mrs. Herron reinforces cultural narratives about gender and addiction, where her alcoholism stands as the greater moral crime than Bill's because of her associated failure as a mother. Bill's redemption, which is closely tied to his successful production of the newspaper with Jap, also is consistent with the frequent correlation in

temperance fiction of sobriety with capitalist productivity. By ascribing the text to Mark Twain, Hutchings and her fellow Ouija board writers endorsed central arguments of the temperance movement, which was closely tied to the Spiritualist movement. Such an engagement with societal concerns reflects the manipulation of authorial legacy Ouija board writing allowed, as Hutchings' insistence on Twain's postmortem authorship of the work exploited his celebrity so as to promote Spiritualist ideology.

Soon after typing the novel from her husband's notes, Hutchings led the effort to publish it as Twain's work and thereby shaped its reception. She relates she presented the copy she had typed of *Jap Herron* to William Marion Reedy, the editor and publisher of a St. Louis weekly journal, without her husband's or Hay's knowledge, in order to "get the opinion of a master critic on the story" (33). Her choice of Reedy was a well-informed one; as she explains, he was known for his fascination with the occult and "unusual literature." Moreover, he was a powerful figure in the publishing industry whose promotion of several living poets and fiction writers had led to their success (33 n.1). Despite Reedy's interest in the paranormal, however, Hutchings presented the work to him "not as evidence of the survival of the human mind after physical death, but as pure fiction" (3). Her decision to do so reflects not only her approach to her involvement in automatic writing as a means of extending an author's career beyond the grave, but also her keen awareness of the work's potential success within a broader market. However, *Jap Herron's* publication by Mitchell Kennerley in 1917 did not attain the praise or

profits Hutchings had anticipated, obtaining instead several scathing reviews.⁴¹ Less than a year later, Kennerley withdrew it from the market after Mark Twain's authorized publishers, Harper and Brothers, sued him and Hutchings, claiming the sole right to publish all of Twain's work – whether composed in life or after death (Rasmussen 747). This lawsuit illustrates how automatic writing disrupts conventional ways of thinking about literary production and attribution. While it cites an earlier rejection by the Harpers, who asserted that *Jap Herron* “didn't emanate from Mark Twain and has no literary merit,” the brothers' claim to the distributing rights of Twain's works as the motivating factor for the suit implicitly raises questions about whether the novel should be considered part of Twain's oeuvre (“Sue for ‘Spirit’ Story”).

By halting the publication of *Jap Herron*, Kennerly and Hutchings avoided having to defend their case that Twain had authored the novel from the beyond, but were also unable to directly profit from the novel Hutchings in particular had anticipated would sell successfully. Her collaboration with her husband and Hays to produce and distribute it nevertheless fashioned Ouija board writing as a modern and efficient means of extending the literary lifespan of a popular author. By insisting on her lack of creative intervention in the production of the manuscript while actively shaping readers' interpretation of it through her efforts to publish and publicize the novel, Hutchings distanced herself from authorial ownership in order to promote her mediumship, but at the same time attained a more powerful role as an editor and literary agent. Like several

⁴¹ The *New York Times*, for example, concluded: “‘If this is the best that ‘Mark Twain’ can do by reaching across the barrier, the army of admirers that his works have won for him will all hope that he will hereafter respect that boundary’” (qtd. in *The Fortnightly Review* 312).

other automatic writing mediums including Hays, Hutchings had already achieved success as an author, but her collaboration with her husband and Hays to record and edit *Jap Herron* as well as with Kennerly to distribute it was her first venture into publishing. For Hutchings and the women who followed, Ouija board writing acted as an entry into publishing, and their collaboration complicated conceptions of authorship and literary production.

**“I Am Kneeling on the Edge of Chaos, No Longer in the World”:
Pearl Curran’s Visions and Writing with Patience Worth**

The fanfare surrounding *Jap Herron* inspired similar Ouija board publications, including many by one medium who attracted considerable publicity. In fact, Hutchings had introduced this medium, Pearl Curran, to the Ouija board in 1912. In the same year Mitchell published *Jap Herron*, one of the oldest and among the more prominent American publishing companies, Henry Holt and Company, began distributing Patience Worth’s first novel, *The Sorry Tale: A Story of the Time of Christ*. Each of the works Curran received through the Ouija board is attributed to Patience Worth as the author, with the tale “communicated through” Curran; they eventually totaled several hundred poems, short stories, proverbs and novels. In addition to producing an unprecedented amount of Ouija board texts throughout her long career, Curran carefully shaped Patience Worth’s literary and popular reception. Like Hutchings, Curran used her automatic writing as a means of obtaining a role more expansive than that of author of the texts. By compiling the messages into a readable form and arranging for their publication, she in effect became an editor and publicist for the text. Her insistence throughout her career

that such work merely involved mediating and recording the messages challenged traditional understandings of writing, rendering her akin to a technological instrument, and automatic writing the modern manufacturing of literature.

Throughout her time as Worth's psychic amanuensis, Curran relied less and less on the Ouija board for the communications, increasingly channeling Worth's words directly and narrating them to her audience. On the one hand, doing so aligned her mediumship much more closely with that practiced throughout the last half of the nineteenth century, when mediums relayed messages from their spirit controls to their séance audiences. However, Curran also blended her vocal mediumship with writing: her utterances were recorded by an observer and typed so they could be published. In addition, Curran and Worth often performed their work simultaneously, with Curran narrating the visions Worth provided her and Worth moving the Ouija planchette for other séance participants to observe and record the letters it indicated. As a result, Curran significantly modified spirit mediumship, reviving earlier practices to demonstrate how the use of recording and print technologies could render it collaborative as well as allow spirits' messages to reach wider audiences. Such an emphasis on collaboration and the portrayal of mediumship as the facilitation of the mass production of writing generated texts that undermine literary conventions.

Two years before publishing Worth's first novel in 1918, Curran contributed to *Patience Worth: A Psychic Mystery*, a work by Casper Yost which was partly a biography of Curran, a history of Patience Worth's earthly life and subsequent spirit communications, and a collection of the poems and short stories she had dictated to

Curran since contacting her in 1912. According to Worth's messages, she had lived in the late seventeenth century in Dorsetshire, England, prior to immigrating to America shortly before her death there. Worth thus used words and spellings Curran and her followers described as "archaic" and "full of the flavor of the seventeenth century," but also often dictated messages that were virtually meaningless (Prince 354, 47). Curran and her sitters therefore played a significant role in interpreting Worth's language particularly during the initial years of their communication, apparently as much to clarify their conversations for their own edification as to enlighten a wider audience reading their work. Psychical researcher Walter Franklin Prince's profile of Curran and collection of Worth's works, *The Case of Patience Worth* (1927) documents a conversation through the Ouija board among Worth and the séance circle consisting of Curran and her husband, Emily and Edwin Hutchings, and Pearl's mother, Mrs. Pollard, that illustrates the group's early communications and their efforts to translate Worth's messages:

P[atience] W[orth]: A triple wash. Mayhap thou canst find the rainbow's end by a damning of the fairie's reed.... Wash thy hands.

Mrs. H[utchings]: Patience, do you mean that conditions are wrong tonight, and that is why the communications are so broken and unsatisfactory?

PW: Oh, my poor heart would beat most faintly 'neath my kirtle, did I feel upon thy faith. Rest.

Mr. C[urran]: We have hurt her. She wants to stop tonight. (qtd. in Prince 42)

As in the above conversation, the sitters worked collectively to assign meaning to Worth's often impenetrable prose, surmising that her messages were difficult to understand because of the historical divide between her former life and their modern existence. With the Ouija group members taking turns to interpret the words Worth spelled through Curran's use of the planchette, each played a role in constructing the

spirit's past, personality, and prophetic wisdom. According to Prince, the group occasionally discussed "how the world would regard the Patience Worth utterances"; their continued efforts to interpret what they understood to be antiquated colloquialisms gave them editorial control in the automatic writing process and signals their intention of attracting a large readership for the messages (44).

However, although Curran is recorded less often in these discussions than Hutchings and other participants as a result of her attention being focused on the board, where her hands busily followed the tracings of the planchette, her own portrayal of her mediumship of Worth's writing had the greatest impact on public perceptions of Patience Worth and of spirit writing itself. In interviews with her biographers Yost and Prince as well as editors of her automatic writing, Curran repeatedly insisted on the deficient education she had received when she was young, and her own lack of interest in learning anything but music. This was despite evidence contradicting her assertions that she had considerable gaps in literary and historical knowledge, such as her impressive collection of books as well as her use of advanced vocabulary when narrating many of her spirit visions⁴² (Prince 325, 417-20). Presenting herself as uneducated, however, served an important function: Curran could assure her audience and Worth's readers that she was incapable of having consciously authored writing that Henry Holt, among several other reviewers, praised as being "literature of a high order" (qtd. in Prince 64). This public

⁴² For example, when narrating her vision accompanying one of Worth's poems, Curran explains she saw "infinitesimal substance, kaleidoscopically assembling as though in creation," demonstrating her ability to vividly articulate her perception of her mental images (qtd. in Prince 325).

image therefore verified Worth's sole authorship as well as her personal history; moreover, it confirmed Curran's own gift as a medium. Her readers and even ostensibly neutral critics were clearly convinced by her self-portrayal; one professor of literature at the University of Manitoba, W.T. Allison, is quoted by Prince as strongly doubting that Curran could subconsciously produce such material because of her lack of education. Moreover, he asserts that Patience Worth's "wonderful command of local color and of the customs and humors of the past" verifies accounts of her life story, as she "must have seen the events and characters that she describes" (56).

Curran's and her associates' promotion of Worth's intriguing connection to the past served as a marketing strategy for Worth's works at the same time that it fashioned spirit-inspired automatic writing as a method by which to mass produce and circulate historical narratives in vivid and varied ways. Worth's biography ensured her American readers would maintain an interest in the tales of her past life, as it recalled a nostalgic interpretation of early American history and colonization. Indicating Worth had immigrated close to the end of her life to New England before being "killed in a foray by the Indians" during King Philip's War, the text reinforces interpretations of American history that overlook European settlers' genocide of native populations by portraying the colonists as victims of the natives' savage violence (Prince 34 n.2). As an early settler and victim of the dangerous living conditions colonists faced, Worth could appeal to American readers as a sympathetic figure as well as one with insight into its national character. By relating this account of Worth's history to her séance audience as well as to her biographers, Curran shaped readers' interpretations of American history and

constructions of national identity. In the process, she figured automatic writing as a means of reviving the past, the Ouija board serving as a modern technology with which to access historical events and in turn convey this experience to her readers.

While other Ouija mediums like Emily Hutchings had downplayed their own roles in producing recorded texts and emphasized their editing and marketing input, Curran's relationship to the authorship of Worth's texts was more ambivalent. Prince explains it was only during the first six years of Worth acting as Curran's spirit control that Curran relied upon the Ouija board for the communications; by 1918, the planchette "simply circled aimlessly," largely neglected by Curran (344). Instead, she asserted that she had begun directly receiving Worth's words through her mental images of them, which she transcribed onto paper. But far from abandoning Ouija board writing altogether, Curran increasingly blended various forms of writing and spirit mediumship when receiving and transmitting her visions, as she and Worth simultaneously disseminated their supernatural insights. On these occasions, which increased in frequency throughout her career as Worth's medium, Curran's ability to first visualize the words Patience had earlier spelled out on the Ouija board, and later perceive the "vision-pictures that Patience sometimes [gave] her in connection with her poems," supplanted her role of attending to the movements of the planchette (312). While these direct visions could have decreased Curran's collaboration with others, she continued to encourage sharing the work of recording Worth's messages in her attempts to communicate her visions to her audience and readers. According to Prince, Curran's Ouija group had always included a stenographer, who early on recorded the letters Worth indicated on the

board through Curran's movement of the planchette, and later noted down Curran's rapid and extensive narration of her visions. Curran later explored various methods of conveying Worth's messages, increasingly expressing aloud her mental impressions as Worth guided her hand to record poetry; throughout the process, observers in the room such as her husband, Prince or other séance attendees took careful notes so as to subsequently publish them. As the visual elements of Worth's messages became central to the spirit's fiction and other writing, Curran thus adapted to an arrangement in which she managed multiple tasks in inscribing Worth's literary works but also encouraged communal work. With each person acting as a transcriptionist for specific portions of the visions, Curran and her colleagues amassed material comprising a variety of visual and literary content while dividing the tasks so as to render the process more efficient.

As Curran's mediumship and use of the Ouija board evolved, Curran used her status as Worth's medium to transform her position as a Ouija board transcriptionist to that of a clairvoyant. As the human instrument recording Worth's literary works and delivering them to her audience in a variety of formats, Curran reconfigured mediumship to unite the performance of multiple tasks related to various types of sensory perception. In essence, she embodied print, visual and auditory media technologies, often simultaneously writing by hand Worth's words after they appeared in Curran's mind, drawing pictures of the "panoramas" she channeled, and expressing aloud the sights and sounds her mental impressions gave her. Yet while her lack of conscious interference in creating the messages was crucial to her accurately producing Worth's works, her complete mental absence was not, for her visions allowed her to mentally travel through

time and space. It is because of her aspiration to fully reproduce these images for her audience and readers that she employed so many methods of communicating them, as she often complained of the difficulty she confronted in attempting to accurately represent what Worth transmitted to her. She relates that she gained access through her visions to an expansive view of “infinite distances,” including scenes of nature on Earth and wider panoramas of stars and “sweeps of space” (394-5). Although at times appearing to Curran without Worth’s accompanying explanations, more often these images underscore the connection between visuality and language in Curran’s channeling of Worth’s work, as they usually directly preceded or coincided with Curran’s transcription of Worth’s poetry and fiction. As Charles Cory’s 1919 profile in the *Psychological Review* implies, Worth’s communications with Curran contained a cinematic quality which Curran attempted to replicate in her narration of them so that “[n]ot only do the letters appear but the entire panorama of the story seems to move before her, like pictures on a screen” (qtd. in Prince 432). With her mind acting as this screen for Worth’s visual and literary spectacle, Curran reformulated her role as a writing medium to one where she drew upon various forms of media technologies to interpret and represent her spirit control’s communications.

Increasingly experimenting with the form of automatic writing and visual mediumship to push beyond their representational limits, Curran portrayed herself as a creative partner to Worth in disseminating her work, yet at the same time insisted that her mediumship only provided her access to messages that did not involve her conscious contribution. On one occasion in 1926, for example, Curran demonstrated her ability to

concurrently record Worth's poetry, narrate the accompanying visions she obtained of the setting and experiences that inspired the poem, and sketch representations of these images for her audience of séance participants and psychical researchers. Although she emphasized she was merely transmitting Worth's messages, her visions allowed her to experience firsthand the events contained within Worth's writing before recording and interpreting them for her audience. As a result, her narration of her visions constructed alternate notions of reality and sensory experience as well as of linear space and time. And while critics like Kittler have dismissed automatic writing as little more than a "[s]yllabic hodgepodge," the collaborative work Curran and her assistants performed to record and assemble Worth's messages produced a counterfactual narrative that eroded formal literary conventions (229).

Prince's record of such a sitting, where Curran composed Worth's poem while describing her own view of its setting, illuminates her revision of the boundaries of historical and fictional genres as well as visual representations of them. Prince relates that Curran automatically composed the poem while pausing in between lines to narrate her visions to her audience and at times draw pictures of them, which consisted of a seventeenth-century battlefield, scenes of the progression of seasons in various locations on Earth, and finally an expansive view of the universe. Her description of the scenes situates her as a participant in them, with her audience and readers spectators of her imagined travels. At the outset of the poem, after Curran automatically writes the line from Worth, "And I sing. Yea, I have flown like a molten fluid into being. Yea, I am

uttered,” Curran supplements these words by pausing in her writing to describe her accompanying vision:

I am in the middle of a battlefield. It is not today. It is a beautiful scene. I am going to describe the scene if Patience will keep it for me. I seem to be without armor although I seem to be part of a fight. It is a very, very green country, with very, very thick turf.... Now there are myriads of these figures (draws picture) that were knights in armor, and I am empty, and am dashing in, and this is blood. (qtd. in Prince 323)

Juxtaposing the poem’s opening lines against her observation of the battlefield as a character within the larger progression of Worth’s message, Curran renders the manuscript a mixture of genres and media so that her writing, drawing and statements form a literary and visual history. She and her colleagues collectively work as a recording device for this fantasy of time travel, the imperialist undercurrent of which is exemplified by the line, ““Song is conquest; it is war and blood”” (324). In spite of its nostalgic focus on an earlier era, the text builds on speculative fiction by authors such as H.G. Wells that emerged at the turn of the century, figuring mediumship as akin to a time machine.

Although much of her writing took place in front of several observers, as Curran relied less on the Ouija board, the process of her composing the works also included her independently transcribing them. She notes in an article in *The Unpartizan Review* that she began using a typewriter for these purposes, which allowed her to record the material without ““conscious effort”” and with great speed (qtd. in Prince 403). Her statement demonstrates Gitelman’s alignment of the history and cultural impact of the typewriter with that of Spiritualist automatic writing, as they “shared the dilemma of indeterminate authorial agency” (213). Yet paradoxically, it was also at the typewriter where she discovered her own authorial voice: Curran reveals she began writing creatively ““on my

own account – without the impulse from Patience Worth” on the same typewriter she used to record Worth’s works after abandoning the Ouija board (403). Insisting she noticed a clear distinction between her own act of writing and how she felt while transcribing Worth’s messages, Curran suggests that even automatic writing entails a level of awareness on the part of the medium, one allowing her to sense the telltale “presence” of Worth and accompanying “pictures of the symbols, the pressure on my head” as she channeled and interpreted the spirit’s dictation. The typewriter served as an improvement over the Ouija board for Curran because it eliminated the intervening steps of her reading and then reciting individual letters to a stenographer. At the same time, Curran acknowledged that the typewriter in some ways mimicked the function of the board, “offer[ing] the letters in the same way that the Ouija did” so that she could produce the letters and words she envisioned (403). Each served as a tool with which she assembled the words transmitted to her in visions as she produced a vast array of literary works while also interpreting them for her readers. Employing various methods of preparing these works for publication, whether through an intervening recorder and typist or later, through her own typing, Curran paved the way for the mass production and consumption of them, disseminating her visions through a body of work that strained the boundaries of literary and publishing conventions.

As she eventually published six novels, dozens of short stories and thousands of poems, Curran profited from her role in recording Patience Worth’s messages, not only building her own career as an author but also participating in the preparation of multiple texts for publication. Her collaboration with other Spiritualists to transcribe and

disseminate the writing provided her the opportunity to interact with prominent Spiritualists such as Casper Yost who encouraged her promotion of the material through interviews in the Spiritualist press. The assembly-line nature of their collective work also resulted in the unusual form and content representative of the mass production of literature. As the most prolific of automatic writers, Curran expanded the possibilities for mediums' involvement in the dissemination of Spiritualism at the same time that her work challenged formal conventions of authorship and publishing.

Elizabeth Stewart's Multiple Lives and the Production of Counterfactual Histories

“If there is any truth in this story from the ‘unseen’ then I must have lived in 1500,” Elizabeth Stewart proclaims in the opening lines of her compilation of automatic writing (1). Published in 1927, the British medium's book, *The Language of the Spirits*, produces a counterfactual history of the reign of Henry VIII, employing a variety of narratives and images to relay what Stewart claims to be messages from several Early Modern spirit guides, including the king himself. Although unlike Curran, Hutchings, and Perrin and Walters, she worked alone to record these, she nonetheless conceived of her work as collaborative, contending that her spirit guides each provided distinct visions and directed her transcription of them through a mixture of handwritten text and illustrations. *The Language of the Spirits* thus integrates multiple forms of literature and images much like Curran's writing and similarly combines elements of historical and speculative fiction. As it was her only publication, Stewart's automatic writing gave her access to authorship as well as significant involvement in publishing, for she self-published the

work through the private printer and bookbinder, the Garden City Press. While having her work printed by this small company limited its distribution, it also gave her an unusual amount of editorial control over the records of her visions and the messages she claimed to have received from spirit guides.

Like Curran during the latter phase of her career, Stewart directly transcribed the collective missives; the two mediums' preference for this mode of automatic writing reflected the decreasing popularity among mediums of using the Ouija board to record spirit messages throughout the later 1920s and 1930s. This process wherein mediums acted in essence as the physical extension of spirits who guided their hands is in many ways comparable to the use of the planchette, but more directly associated the medium's body with instrumentality by eliminating the mediating technological apparatus and in turn positioning the spirit medium as a writing machine. However, despite the physical toll the handwriting could take on mediums and the degree to which it slowed down spirit communications in comparison to the speed of the typewriter, the majority of published automatic writing appears to have been composed by hand. While likely due in part to its tools being easily accessible, automatic handwriting allowed for greater aesthetic freedom in representing spirit communications. As in direct spirit writing decades earlier, handwritten mediated writing could allow for the differentiation between spirit authors based on the varying script; several automatic writers reported that their handwriting changed depending on which spirit controlled their hand.⁴³ Yet for mediums like Stewart

⁴³ Una, Lady Troubridge reports in an article written for the Society for Psychical Research, for example, that the medium Mrs. Leonard "produce[d] script in varying hand-writing," and that "[t]wo or more hand-writings will sometimes be involved in one script" (360).

who published their work as typewritten copies, such identification was irrelevant to the transmission of the messages to their readers. Instead, their handwriting created the potential for more varied and comprehensive representations of their spirit guides' communications and their own visions. Stewart's *The Language of the Spirits* exemplifies this, her printed volume of the messages forming a hybrid of textual and visual media that destabilizes traditional forms of print.

Written for the most part as a transcript of her conversations with her spirit controls, *The Language of the Spirits* places much less emphasis on ascribing authorship to the spirits or to Stewart than it does on illuminating the privileged perspective on history Stewart's mediumship offered her. While the text usually indicates whether it is a spirit or Stewart who expresses the recorded thoughts, it occasionally omits these references, leaving the reader to determine the source of the information being offered. In these instances, the momentary slippage between Stewart's identity and that of the responding spirit temporarily blurs the boundary between the specter relaying otherworldly knowledge and her status as the one receiving it. This distinction is further undermined by the information Stewart obtains from her chief spirit guide that she both embodies her physical form as a human living in the early twentieth century and possesses a transcendent soul that acts as one of her other spirit guides. Through this splitting of the self, Stewart conceives of herself as directly experiencing the events her personified soul describes at the same time that her unconscious self records them. Being "half in one world and half in another" places her in the unique position as an automatic writer of consciously envisioning and perceiving herself as a participant in what she

records (48). She also expresses ambivalence in categorizing her writing as automatic; although her spirit guides advise her that they produce the content of her records by writing on a “floating mind and it useth [her] hand to write the words,” she guides their conversations by posing questions to these spirits (11). Through her contention that her spirit controls have dictated their messages to her and sent her images for her to reproduce by hand, Stewart complicates psychical researchers’ and Spiritualists’ insistence on a medium’s mental absence during her automatic writing. Uniting her conscious participation in these otherworldly conversations with her visions of her own past lives and the automatic recording of these events, Stewart’s transcription renders even her individual writing collaborative in its production. While her individual work represents a departure from the model Perrin and Walters, Hutchings, and Curran relied upon, Stewart’s depiction of her mediumship as a means of time travel aligned automatic writing with modern technology as their Ouija board collaboration did. Constructing her communication with spirits as a means of documenting an alternate history, she fashioned her text as a travel guide to the past.

More important for Stewart than questions of authorship is the access that her clairvoyance provided her to information she wished to disseminate to readers about previous epochs as well as future predictions about the world.⁴⁴ Through her visions and writing, Stewart, like Curran, was not confined to her embodied physical existence; unlike Curran, however, she considered her ability to transcend time and space to be

⁴⁴ Incidentally, Stewart also obtained information about a variety of more contemporaneous and certainly unusual concerns by asking the spirits frank questions such as “What about birth control?” and “Is it right to put monkey glands into humans?” (104).

unrestricted as a result of her multiple reincarnations, rather than temporary and dependent upon her spirit controls. Although her work primarily focuses on her communication with spirits from the early sixteenth century, through which she claims to have obtained the majority of her spiritual knowledge, she refers several times to her own life during this period, and maintains that she interacted with these spirits while they were all living. Her work thus becomes as much a means of conveying spiritual insights to the wider public as it serves as a record of her multiple life stories and transhistorical knowledge. Through her spirit visions as well as her layers of memories, she reimagines historical events, people and places that are fundamental to England's position as a world power, in the process offering an interpretation of its history and future that reinforces nationalist and imperialist ideologies. According to her work, her most frequent spirit correspondent was Henry VIII, who at first defended his record as king and the executions of his wives but later, as a result of Stewart's prayers, ascended to a higher spiritual sphere that allowed him to view England's future. He explains that although he has "marked the sinking sun of England," the pictures he projects to Stewart "meaneth that through the learning and fair wit of England's sons will she again rise to be the leader of the nations on Earth.... I know that England's greatness will increase, grow and spread itself on the Earth" (9-10). Recording the message during the interwar years, Stewart obtains a comforting prophecy for a nation concerned about its international standing from the spirit of one of the most powerful men in English history. Employing this rhetoric also rendered her text an imperialist technology, its prediction of England's

global dominance mirrored by its portrayal of her mediumship as a tool with which to possess knowledge.

Stewart's account of the conversations in which she participates with her spirit controls as well as her visions of her past lives situates her as a recording instrument at the same time that she actively interprets and shapes the knowledge she relays. Like Curran, Stewart disrupts cultural constructions of the relationship between gender and the production of knowledge, where, as Galvan observes, women "became associated with an automatic state of reduced or fragmented attention" and thus seemed incapable of creating or altering the content of messages (63-4). In her capacity as transcriptionist of histories she claims to have experienced firsthand, Stewart conveys information obtained privately from individual spirits including Henry VIII or Tomasso, who identifies himself as an Italian monk and an enemy of the king, creating an alternative to authorized historical knowledge. She often serves as Henry VIII's confessor, as he unburdens his soul to her by relating the acts of murder and torture he committed but endeavors to provide an explanation for them, such as Anne Boleyn having provoked him with "her wickedness and lying" (41). The insight she attains through her counseling of his spirit leads her to conclude that his contemporaries "had held the king up in too bad a light," challenging popular cultural condemnations of Henry VIII (110). If historians only possessed such privileged information, Stewart implies, England would view Henry VIII as a king whose depravity was in fact justified by the circumstances he faced and his desire to promote England's welfare; it therefore appeared contingent upon Stewart to correct public opinion through the publication of the records.

Stewart frequently admits her interest in distributing the communications to as many readers as possible, as she asks her spirit controls for guidance on the best methods of publishing her work. Every time she discusses this prospect with one of the spirits, usually Henry VIII, it is she who introduces the topic of publishing the work. On one occasion, in the midst of his polemic about Mary Boleyn having tricked her way into being given the title of Countess – another event omitted from general history books, Henry complains – Stewart interjects, “If I tried to publish the script and pictures, what would I call the book?” (71). Her desire for editorial control as well as her confidence in her understanding of the Spiritualist literary market are betrayed by her eventual rejection of his recommendations, which ranged from “Pictures from the Invisible” to “the King’s Gallery of Signs” and “Symbols of the Unseen” (72). Similarly, Stewart later asks him whether he can predict “the difficulties over the publishing of this book”; Henry doesn’t directly answer, but admits his preference for a vellum binding (102). Although other automatic writers who published their records indicated their intention of circulating them and, like Hutchings, initiated the process of publication, they often suggest in their writing that such efforts were first proposed by their spirit guides. Stewart, on the other hand, sought the publication of her automatic writing almost from the beginning of her work, perceiving the messages as significant revisions to her nation’s history and predictions of its future. Her lament that such an infamous figure provides the bulk of the historical corrections reveals her conviction that her automatic writing should be considered a legitimate historical document: “It is a great pity I cannot substitute another name for Henry VIII, as spiritualists would not then turn away and shrug their shoulders.

If I did so the sketches and writing would lose all their historical value” (5). Presenting her automatic writing as capable of challenging the historical record, Stewart designates it as crucial to transforming private messages into widely-disseminated documents that warranted public consumption. In doing so, she suggests that her automatic writing was more culturally significant than her predecessors’ channeling of fiction, and her role as medium a source of scholarly authority.

Because of her ability to obtain these crucial insights, Stewart maintains, it is her responsibility to represent her otherworldly knowledge as accurately as possible to her future readers. The structure of her automatic writing, despite all of it having been initially composed by hand rather than on the Ouija board or at the typewriter, shares similarities with Curran’s in that hers also includes a variety of images. Whereas Curran emphasized the visual nature of her communication with Worth, particularly in the mental images she received of Worth’s poetry and novels, Stewart provides descriptions of her own immediate visions obtained through her memories of past lives, including her mental image of the kitchen at Hampton Court Palace (6). Stewart also produced a number of spirit drawings, characterizing them as integral to the messages her guides sent her and indicating that they, too, needed to be circulated to as many people as possible. While Curran often sketched her visions by choice during Ouija board writing sessions in order to convey what she saw to the audience in the room, Stewart describes her spirit drawings in *The Language of the Spirits* as visual symbols of the spirits’ communications which were as much a part of the messages as the written language. According to the prologue, which Stewart indicates was “Sent by [a] Spirit Writer,” the spirits “have found

you [Stewart] are the only living woman who can receive these thoughts of the spirits, in the writing of the spirits”; her automatic writing interprets and approximates as closely as possible the “shapes of dreams” spirits send each other (vii). Therefore, in presenting to her readers the personal narrative of Henry VIII and his contention that historians have unfairly maligned him, she includes drawings that visually represent his explanation of the ways Mary Boleyn wronged him (Figure 5.5). Although indicative of only rudimentary drawing skills, the pictures remind the reader of Henry’s insistence that historians failed to document his own suffering, such as that resulting from Mary manipulating him to bestow the title of Countess of Alton upon her. Each image in the set, according to Stewart’s caption, represents one of Boleyn’s alleged misdeeds; with them, Stewart allows her readership access to her psychic visions as well as the written messages she claims to have obtained from her spirit guide. Yet her captions evince her ultimate inability to fully communicate the meaning behind the visions: without them, it would be difficult to interpret the drawings and impossible to realize that the vibrant colors she apparently employed in drawing them bear significance to the stories, as the images are printed in black and white. In particular, she explains in its title that image 32 depicts the result of Boleyn’s decree that a nobleman be beheaded and outlines with explicit detail its inclusion of a “figure with no head, [and] blood on the neck” (76). In attempting to reproduce her visions in print, Stewart combines visual and print media, but nevertheless signals the inadequacy of either form to convey her experiences as a medium.



Fig. 5.5. A selection of Elizabeth Stewart's drawings of her spirit images; this set represents the information Henry VIII gave her about Mary Boleyn's nefarious deeds.

Ensuring that the spirit pictures she sketched, numbering more than forty in all, accompanied her collection of automatic writing, Stewart presents the spirits' "language" as inherently visual as much as textual. As "the only living woman" capable of viewing the full extent of her spirit guides' messages, Stewart used her mediumship to direct the publication of her records of supernatural communications. While her independent publishing of the work decreased the potential for the large-scale printing and marketing of it, it also allowed her to maintain control over its production. This authority over the

publication of her automatic writing challenged the limitations imposed on women's involvement in publishing as she circulated a narrative of time travel as innovative as the science fiction authored during the era.

Stewart's text thus extended the reformulation of print media begun by mediums who wrote automatically in the late nineteenth century and continued by those publishing their work alongside *The Language of the Spirits*. Offering recordings of spirit communications that combined their multifaceted interventions in the messages with transcriptions of their words, these mediums acted as recording instruments in preparing spirit texts for mass distribution while simultaneously shaping the texts. By structuring the process of assembling the documents as collaborative, either through the mediums' division of the labor among their colleagues or their work alongside spirit guides to record the messages, they represented their approach to writing as modern in its industrial efficiency and facilitation of mass production and distribution. Performing a multitude of roles in collectively producing the manuscripts and arranging them for publication, mediums circulated writing that challenged conventions of authorship and editorship. In presenting their texts as capable of conveying spirits' messages to a mass readership, they demonstrated the ways mediated writing could produce works that revised constructions of print media technologies while engaging with cultural ideologies.

By turning to Spiritualist publishing, Perrin and Walters, Hutchings, Curran, and Stewart attained powerful roles as they directed the process of compiling and circulating their otherworldly communications. While their writing has been largely dismissed by literary critics and historians, their focus on its literary merit neglects these women's

contributions to publishing. Their representation of literary production as a technologized process problematizes the Romantic notions of writing that continue to shape critical assessments of automatic writing, but paradoxically enabled the creative mixture of literary genres and media within the texts. Mediums who published these compilations therefore not only achieved their objective of disseminating the messages to the Spiritualist community; their work also destabilizes traditional conceptions of writing, formal literary conventions, and publishing.

Afterward: The Afterlives of Victorian Mediumship

“No matter where I go,” medium Theresa Caputo declares, “spirits come to me, and I am compelled to help. This is not just my job. This is my life.” Caputo, otherwise known as the “Long Island Medium,” has built her career on what she describes as her “amazing gift from God” of being able to communicate with the dead. Since its debut in September 2011, the reality television show profiling her séances and other supernatural communications has drawn millions of viewers every week. Each episode centers on the individual and group sittings Caputo gives before the camera as she relays messages from lost loved ones to her clients and provides details about the deceased family member or friend that she seemingly could only have divined through psychic intuition. In the first episode of the series, she stresses in the opening scene that she has no way of learning such specific details other than through the visions and messages her spirit guide relays through her, claiming to only know her clients’ first names and telephone numbers supplied when scheduling their visits. Her professional persona has clearly been shaped by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spiritualist constructions of mediumship, as demonstrated when she describes her role as being “just the vessel” for conveying spirits’ messages to those they left behind on Earth (“No Turning Off”). Substituting her dining room table for the Victorian parlor or Spiritualist meeting hall, Caputo frames her mediumship as a modern take on traditions of communicating with the dead.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Indeed, Caputo’s show is one of many, including *Crossing Over with John Edward* (1999-2004) and the fictional *Medium* (2005-2011), that have capitalized in recent years on the sustained interest in psychics.

Like Estelle Roberts and other stage mediums, Caputo not only provides her clients with comforting visions of their family and friends, but also operates as a broadcast medium herself. As she recites the messages she claims to obtain from spirits, viewers across the United States get a glimpse of her sitters' relationships with their departed loved ones and learn personal details about the deceased, many of which had been evidently unknown even to the client prior to consulting Caputo. In one instance, during a sitting with Celina, a client from Staten Island hoping to contact her best friend, Caputo begins with a few moments of automatic writing which forms the names of Celina and her friend, prompting Celina to confess she had written their names in concrete when she was alone one day shortly after his death. Reporting next that she feels a sharp blow to the back of her head which she hypothesizes is a message about the manner in which the friend had died, Caputo confirms with Celina that he had been shot to death, but also reveals he didn't suffer and had expressed the hope that Celina wouldn't feel guilty for not having gone out with him on the night of his death. Throughout the sitting, the cameras pan in for close-ups of the medium and her sitter, particularly when Celina begins weeping and Caputo comforts her with reassuring messages about her friend's happiness in the afterlife. As with the Mumlers' and Houghton's spirit photographs depicting the affective bonds between sitter and specter, as well as Robert's stage demonstrations, Caputo's show centers on these poignant moments, exhibiting in every episode her ability as a medium to console her clients through her supernatural powers. The episode concludes with Celina describing the closure she has received as a result of the sitting in a commentary that becomes standard

for Caputo's clients to give in subsequent episodes, and one that serves as an endorsement of the medium's ability to psychically unite people with those they mourn.

Caputo's séances underscores how New Age Spiritualism is firmly rooted in practices developed by the mediums studied in this dissertation. Using the same rhetoric describing their mediumship as their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predecessors, modern-day mediums like Caputo have capitalized on the advent of television and the internet to disseminate their beliefs in the afterlife and build a global following. However, by continuing to reinforce traditional gender norms emphasizing women's caregiving function, she and other contemporary mediums have maintained the stance that their work is divorced from capitalism, and instead arises from their inherent sensitivity. On one hand concealing Caputo's research performed off-camera and, in all likelihood, that of numerous assistants, just as earlier mediums including Anna Eva Fay, Mrs. Guppy and Georgiana Houghton kept their own labor away from the public eye, she and hundreds of fellow mediums remain the focal point of Spiritualist mediumship. Through their work, these mediums have not only shaped the history of Spiritualism and conceptions about the afterlife, but have also left a lasting impression on modern-day British and American cultural identities.

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