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Beyond the Lecture Hall: Spectral Bodies and Touch in Nineteenth-Century Material Mediumship

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BEYOND THE LECTURE HALL:
SPECTRAL BODIES AND TOUCH IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
MATERIAL MEDIUMSHIP

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
1. OVERLOOKED: FINDING ROOM FOR MATERIAL MEDIUMS IN THE CURRENT LITERATURE	5
2. REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEBODY: VARIETIES AND APPLICATIONS OF MATERIAL MEDIUMSHIP	22
3. ILLIMITABLE SPACE: THE SÉANCE CIRCLE AND THE CREATION OF SOCIAL SPACE-TIME	43
CONCLUSION	65
References	67
Biographical Sketch	73

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes both the material phenomena channeled by antebellum Spiritualists, and the attendant séance form. Sitter accounts, emphasizing the desire for emotional and material points of connection with spirits, challenge previous interpretations of material phenomena as novel sensationalism. Through practice, material mediums demonstrated an ideal model of selfhood as social, bodily, and free from spatial confines. Rail technology's disruption of the traditional social and spatial implications of distance opened up the possibility for a radical reimagining of space as primarily social, and erasable through physical and emotional harmony. Though previously neglected, practices around material manifestations demonstrate a strategic model of bodily selfhood complementary to the larger Spiritualist project of pursuing an imminent universal harmony.

INTRODUCTION

Histories of Spiritualism have neglected the physical phenomena enabled by material mediums—table shaking, spirit music, and physical manifestations—as sensational novelties, barely engaged with larger Spiritualist projects of reform and scientific enthusiasm. However, a close investigation reveals both a compatibility with Spiritualists’ larger aim to “unite mankind” against fracturing politics and the closely related fracturing sciences that suggested “we had no souls at all, or that they were more ignorant and powerless with their bodies than with them.”¹ Trance and channeling mediums—using their bodies to give voice to abstracted personalities—tapped into both a higher harmonious social reality, as well as a legitimating platform for reform discourse.²

As demonstrated in Ann Braude’s and Molly McGarry’s work on Spiritualism, Spiritualists’ reform concerns and subversive practices centered largely around legal and medical treatment of female bodies. The abstracted personality, free from determinative biology and able to re-gender inhabited bodies, demonstrated the errors of heroic medicine and gendered politics, which situated any subjective self as only secondary to a mechanical and highly unstable physiology. And though the Spiritualist imagination proved much more able to imagine gendered rather than racial harmony, the political tension around slavery was, at its core, a question of bodily autonomy. Material mediums (a native category) enacted, rather than discussed, an alternative picture of bodily selfhoods.

¹ Nathaniel Tallmadge, “Letter to Helen N. Whitman,” (Baltimore: April 12, 1853), in Charles Linton, *The Healing of the Nations*, (New York: Society for the Diffusion of Spiritual Knowledge, 1855), 475. Emma Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years Record of the Communion Between Earth and the World of Spirits*, (New York: Self Published, 1870), 115.

² Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003). Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* 2nd ed., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

In the final decades of the nineteenth-century, full body manifestations and other dramatic camp demonstrations of material phenomena eclipsed the popularity of earlier trance mediumship, and increased popular perception of mediums as intentional (rather than self-deceived or mentally ill) frauds. Many historians have read this post-war popularity and transformation of material mediumship as a later sensationalist dilution of Spiritualism's early political vision. Rather than focusing on the most visible and popular decades of material mediumship, this project will establish the necessary context for such a transformation by examining the formative years of material mediumship. Through practice, material séances realized a version of selfhood that reunited a subjective, emotive personality with the material body, while liberating both from the spatial and temporal limitations imposed on earthbound bodies.

Chapter one defends Robert Cox's formulation of Spiritualism as a movement founded on an emotional logic privileging sympathy as a means of repairing a politically fractured republic and a medically fractured self. This interpretation harmonizes a fractured historiography, which has taken up the various sites of technology, legal reform, and medical reform in isolation. Chapter one also defends material mediumship as an important site of Spiritualism, expressing the same emotionally grounded logic and resistance to legal and institutional authority historians have identified in trance and channeling mediumship.

Chapter two utilizes published sitter accounts of material séances, arguing that the audience expectations communicated through séance accounts challenges the characterization of material phenomena as novel sensationalism. Sitters consistently expressed a desire for emotionally grounded connections with spirit others. The pinnacle of such emotional connection came through the spirits' touch. In light of nineteenth-century constructions of the senses, touch

was an immediate, emotionally grounded sensory channel. Touch communicated an immediate and social other.

Chapter three argues that material séances expressed a vision of selfhood as inseparable from, though in no way limited by, the body. As a prelude to the material séance, mediums directed a careful arrangement of, and touch between, earthbound bodies. Mediums inscribed the circle as a social space, founded on a physical bodily arrangement. An arrangement and touch that primed sitters for a social experience of spectral bodies. Furthermore, the Spiritualist reimagining of bodies reflected a larger societal reimagining of the spatial boundaries around bodies, as rail technology broke down long held meanings of distance and terrain. The expanded social possibilities realized by the train offered Spiritualists a catalyst for imagining a network of social bodies uninhibited by distance.

In analyzing the material séance, I relied on published séance accounts. As a result, this is simultaneously a close reading of Spiritualist practice as well as the narratives produced around practice. Periodicals and traveling mediums worked hand in hand to spread Spiritualism across the country. Published séance accounts were both descriptive reports of what sitters experienced and prescriptive (by virtue of appearing in the Spiritualist press) accounts of proper material séances. There are many unseen editorial hands involved in the séance accounts I rely upon in this work. This is appropriate for identifying predominant themes and establishing an initial interpretation of a broad and diverse practice. Despite the inherent promotional nature of these accounts, I have accepted them as reliable accounts of subjective experiences, accounts that resonated with a broad readership. I hope that future work will test my argument against private journals and letters not featured in this work.

Material mediums developed a unique strategy supporting the larger Spiritualist project of restoring harmonious relations and selfhoods. This thesis argues for a socially grounded, body-centric interpretation of material séances. One in which the body functioned as an expression of selfhood, and bodily touch grounded social relationships.

CHAPTER 1

OVERLOOKED: FINDING ROOM FOR MATERIAL MEDIUMS IN THE CURRENT LITERATURE

Over the past 40 years, the historiography around nineteenth-century American Spiritualism has treated one style of public intellectual mediumship as representative of the larger movement. Starting with R. Laurence Moore's *In Search of White Crows*, historians have taken up the themes of scientism, technological optimism, liberal reform, and therapeutic utility. Material mediums' apparent lack of engagement with these themes has led to the interpretation that sensational styles of Spiritualism were marginal or later developments on the intellectual trance mediumship that developed in lecture halls. This interpretation has been reproduced over the years as historians have relied heavily on the literature produced by trance mediums. Material mediums, whose trade was in manifestations rather than words, did not leave behind the same degree of accessible expository data. This chapter will argue that these themes, as taken up by trance mediums, were not incompatible with the practice of material mediums, despite their exclusion from the current historiography.

Robert Cox framed Spiritualism as a movement founded on a rationality that privileged emotion as a valid intellectual tool for mapping and repairing the human relationships that were fractured by divisions of nationality, race, gender, and radical individualism. This formulation offers a starting point for making sense of the differing but highly compatible strategies employed by trance lecturers and material mediums. Both sought to repair societal fractures through a dissolving of boundaries. As one spirit explained to former Wisconsin Governor Nathaniel Tallmadge, the purpose of the manifestations was to “unite mankind.”³ Trance

³ Tallmadge, “Letter to Helen N. Whitman,” (Baltimore: April 12, 1853), 475.

lecturers demonstrated that temporal and bodily boundaries were conditional, while material mediums demonstrated the conditionality of spatial and material boundaries. Both sides of the movement worked against the institutional knowledge that was understood as a means of upholding and reproducing fracturing differences.

As most histories of Spiritualism note in their introduction, Spiritualism was decentralized, open to innovation, and maintained a very blurred boundary between insiders and outsiders. The big tent of Spiritualism was poorly defined. It comfortably bled over into liberal Protestantism, Catholicism, Harmonialism, occultism, revivalism, or materialism (to name just a few). With no definitive interpretation on the means of spirit communication, individuals and communities were free to select and frame interpretations that served their interests. There was no obligatory institution to consider and no necessary level of commitment to maintain. Differentiating between Spiritualists and those merely influenced by or curious about the movement depends on the judgment of the historian. It is not surprising then that many have taken the most expository and public style of Spiritualism as its definitive form.

This public style of trance mediumship was incredibly important to the spread of the movement, and it contributed much more to the public perception of Spiritualism than did material mediumship, which generally occurred in small scale domestic settings and was directed at believers more than curious outsiders. As will be shown in chapters two and three, material mediumship developed and spread alongside trance mediumship. They were two equally important sides of a single movement. The literature of nineteenth-century Spiritualism makes it clear that prominent trance mediums understood material mediumship as a central part of the movement. The Fox sisters themselves pioneered many of the techniques and phenomena that became standard trade tools, but the secondary literature has tended to abandon the story of the

Fox sisters after their initial rise to prominence.⁴ This chapter will examine the historiography of nineteenth-century Spiritualism, demonstrating the preference for trance mediumship, and arguing that this preference has led to a repetition of themes and concerns that—though important to nineteenth-century Spiritualism—were not as defining or widely accepted as historians have suggested.

The current historiography of nineteenth-century Spiritualism begins in 1977 with R. Laurence Moore's *In Search of White Crows*. Moore approached Spiritualism as “a ‘reasonable’ solution to the problem of how to accommodate religious and scientific interests.”⁵ Moore focused on the major public figures of the movement as well as themes of scientific investigation, technology, gender politics, and reform. In the following decades these themes were consistently taken up by historians as the definitive lenses for making sense of the movement.

The Meaning of Science

Moore understood Spiritualism as a mediator between religion and science. He identified four defining qualities of Spiritualism: “a rejection of supernaturalism, a firm belief in the inviolability of natural law, a reliance on external facts rather than on an inward state of mind, and a faith in the progressive development of knowledge.”⁶ In Moore's telling, the overarching goal of Spiritualism “was not to arouse religious emotion, but to calm passions by making things rational and understandable.”⁷ This characterization was supported by much of Spiritualist rhetoric. However, a close reading of the Spiritualists who utilized such language (most notably

⁴ For a notable exception see: Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (Albany: State University of New York Press: 2006).

⁵ R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19.

⁶ *Ibi.*, xii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

Emma Hardinge, Eliab Capron, and Henry Barron) demonstrates that this positivist register was more of an epistemic strategy than an actual faith in the developing material sciences.

In order to understand how Moore settled on the themes of scientific investigation, technology, psychology, gender politics, and reform, it is necessary to look back to Emma Hardinge, who first presented the history of American Spiritualism in these terms with her 1870 work, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years Record of the Communion Between Earth and the World of Spirits*. This encyclopedic history offered a primary account from one of the most well connected, visible, and important public figures in nineteenth-century Spiritualism. It is additionally a rich collection of primary texts, bringing together a number of firsthand accounts and periodicals from the earliest days of the movement. Hardinge's *Modern American Spiritualism* is positioned alongside Podmore's *Modern Spiritualism* and Capron and Barron's *Singular Revelations Explanation and History of the Mysterious Communion of Spirits* to form the core of Spiritualist primary sources. The latter two works, though important, lack the scope of Hardinge's. They also lack the authority to speak for Spiritualism granted to Hardinge as one of the most prominent insiders and disseminators of Spiritualist thought.

Hardinge argued that Spiritualism developed out of the combined influence of mesmerism, magnetism, phrenology, and the Shaker era of manifestation.⁸ If we accept mesmerism, magnetism, and phrenology as subfields of nineteenth-century science (as Hardinge encourages us to do), then Moore's formulation of Spiritualism as mediator between science and

⁸ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 22-27.

The Shaker Era of Manifestation was a period running from the late 1830s through the 1850s. Shakers in the Northeast (young women in particular) reported direct revelations, visions of deceased loved ones, and visions of the afterlife. These communications led to intense ritual proliferation and innovation with a particular focus on mimed ritual, utilizing immaterial tools and apparatus pulled from the spirit world. See: Catharine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 182-190. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 165-199. Clark Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 177-242.

religion stands.⁹ Hardinge says as much, portraying Spiritualists as “deep thinkers of the land to whom ‘religion must be a science’ and ‘science a religion,’ or one or the other must be false and worthless.”¹⁰ However, when read in context the word science as presented by Hardinge, both in her own writing and in those sources she collected, was placed in direct opposition to institutionally sanctioned science.

Nineteenth-century science was alternatively coded as “materialism,” “material science,” or “material philosophy” in Hardinge’s work. Hardinge was adamantly opposed to the materialism of science, which she described as cold, icy, rude, unphilosophic, senseless, and unfaithful.¹¹ She condemned “the abject and unreasoning submission with which the great mass of mankind bow down before the dicta of scientific bodies, and assume that the office of a ‘professor’ confers the ability and title to pronounce authoritative judgment.”¹² Capron and Barron’s work likewise took up a loose language of science, insisting that the rejection of Spiritualism placed it in good company since “in all new sciences there is always something to contend with,” and “in looking back through the rise of various arts and sciences, and improvements in the mortal world, we find almost every important discovery accredited to the—devil.”¹³ In both cases the portrayal of Spiritualism as somehow scientific functions more as a claim to transcendent authority than as genuine scientism.¹⁴ This has been a consistent strategy of metaphysical movements, the most notable contemporary example being the use of stretched interpretations of quantum physics to legitimate modern incarnations of New Thought.

⁹ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 22-27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9, 10, 76, 78, 429, 482.

¹² *Ibid.*, 185.

¹³ Eliab W. Capron and Henry D. Barron, *Singular Revelations: Explanation and History of the Mysterious Communion With Spirits*, 2nd ed. (Auburn: Capron and Barron 1850), 55, 58.

¹⁴ Science functioned here as a transcendent rather than fallible authority because it was implicitly defined as a progressive unfoldment of immutable natural laws.

Science was a strategically ambiguous term for Hardinge. It signified truth more than a methodology or attitude towards knowledge. Hardinge did not explain the role or meaning of science. The closest she came to a definition was her speculative prediction regarding the relation of science to other modes of knowledge. There will be an inevitable “great day of revelation, when man may ascend, as on a Jacob’s ladder, that mighty column where Physics is the base, Science the shaft, Metaphysics the superstructure, and Spiritualism the coronal glory of the capital, whose starry crown pierces the overarching firmament of Heaven.”¹⁵ She offered no further explanation of this schema, but in the wider context of *Modern American Spiritualism* it reads as a value-laden hierarchy. There was in some cases a looking forward, reading Spiritualism as having “planted the seeds of a new science, whose progressive unfoldments must revolutionize the entire realm of human knowledge.”¹⁶ At other points there was a looking back, glorifying ancient knowledge and the occult science of the Elizabethan court.¹⁷ This true science could be easily located in the future or the past, but there was apparently very little of it in nineteenth-century America. Fortunately for Hardinge and her subjects, the wisdom of the past was easily accessible, and the future victory of such wisdom was already visible. Through the medium, past and future came together, and the temporal bounds on progress loosened significantly.

A primary site for the Spiritualist conflict against institutional science was the medicalized self. Ann Braude’s 1989 work *Radical Spirits* was the first to address this conflict. Braude focused on the role of Spiritualism in the larger struggle for women’s rights. One of the greatest barriers in that struggle was the nineteenth-century medicalization of women, which

¹⁵ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 548. See also *Ibid.*, 10, 17, 92, 438, 488, 489. Faustus, “Midnight Disclosures,” *True California* (Oct. 3, 1856), in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 448-450.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 127, 367, 469. James Shields, in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 131-132.

reduced women (both bodily and psychologically) to a dysfunctional anatomy. “Opponents of woman’s rights argued that women’s generative organs inclined them toward disease and debility, making it impossible for women to enter society on an equal footing with men.”¹⁸ This view of women, as inherently dysfunctional, was supported by orthodox medicine. Sectarian medicine—which was varied, open to innovation, and unsupported by academic institutions—offered an alternative schema in which bodies (regardless of gender) were inherently healthy. Disease was understood as an unnatural imbalance, resulting from nineteenth-century society’s separation from the natural world.¹⁹ Many Spiritualists became sectarian healers themselves, diagnosing illnesses, discovering cures, or directly healing imbalances through laying on of hands while in trance.²⁰ Additionally, Spiritualist periodicals promoted various styles of sectarian healing (such as water cure, diet reform, and various styles of exercise) that were not inherently Spiritualist, but were still operating within the model of the human body and mind as naturally healthy so long as they were in proper relation to their constituent elements in the natural world.²¹

Similar themes of medicalization were taken up in Molly McGarry’s *Ghosts of Future Past*. McGarry demonstrated the ways in which Spiritualists justified transgressions of psychological normalcy as sources of metaphysical power. Catalepsy, anorexia miribalis, and periods of ecstasy (understood by nineteenth-century science as symptoms of hysteria) functioned as both effective modes of resisting medical and domestic male authority, as well as evidencing an individual’s proximity to the otherworld. Such states generally accompanied a

¹⁸ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 142.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 144-145. Catherine L. Albanese, “Physics and Metaphysics in Nineteenth-Century America: Medical Sectarians and Religious Healing,” *Church History* Vol. 55 No. 4 (1986): 489-502.

²⁰ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 145-151.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 151-157.

revelation, while enabling “women to take to their beds, thus defeating both their husbands, whose households they left untended, and their male physicians, whose medications they showed to be useless.”²² This captures one of the great contradictions of Spiritualist thought: that women were justified in their metaphysical authority by their relative emptiness and fragility, but that stereotypes of naiveté and fragility were undermined by women’s inherent metaphysical authority.

Though Braude and McGarry have identified medicalization as a major site for the conflict between science and Spiritualism, their work has been read in the context of feminist and queer theory, with little application to the larger anti-institutional and holistic epistemic running throughout nineteenth-century Spiritualism. The attitudes of Spiritualism towards science were consistently confrontational. This attitude has been somewhat obscured by a reliance on expository trance mediums, who confronted institutional science by taking the label for themselves, claiming either by analogy or by creative interpretation that true science, used vaguely as a term for legitimacy or undefined truth, belonged to Spiritualists. If taken at face value, this apparent scientific enthusiasm does place material mediums on the margins, disengaged from the public attitudes and arguments of Spiritualism. However, as has been shown, expository claims to scientific enthusiasm were methods of confrontation. Material mediums were heavily engaged in the same battle, though they utilized very different tactics. Material mediums offered a direct experience of the failures of material science.

Technology: Building a Spiritual Telegraph

Spiritualist enthusiasm for technology generally (and for the telegraph specifically) has often been considered alongside Spiritualist attitudes toward science. Once again, this is

²² Ibid., 139.

problematized by the ways in which Spiritualists were using the term science. It was not as a methodology or a definable epistemic approach. The relation between science and technology in Spiritualist rhetoric was again strategically vague, as Spiritualists found ways to navigate genuine optimism for the possibilities opened by technology without validating the institutional science behind technological advances.

Jeffery Sconces *Haunted Media* offered a starting point for discussing how technology was imagined outside the bounds of institutional science. Sconce's work functioned as "a cultural history of electronic presence," demonstrating the ways in which telecommunication technology has operated as an enchanting force in modernity.²³ For Spiritualism, this enchantment came through the telegraph. "The *concept* of telegraphy made possible a fantastic splitting of mind and body in the cultural imagination."²⁴ The possibility of disembodied communication through what was increasingly assumed to be *the* vital life force (electricity) opened up imaginative possibilities for transcending limits of communication.²⁵ To some degree, Spiritualist predictions regarding the incredible possibilities opened up by electrical technology have proven true. It has in fact surpassed the possibilities of steam, and with the advent of the internet has in some sense transformed the world into the "great assembly, where every one will see and hear everyone else."²⁶ Sconce's approach offered a way of understanding this Spiritualist enthusiasm for technology through an experiential and affective lens, one divorced from a genuine enthusiasm for institutional science and engineering.

The telegraph broke down boundaries of communication, and served as an obvious

²³ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁶ John M. Spear in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 229. A. E. Force in Ebenezer Allen, "Spiritualism in Texas," *The Spiritual Telegraph* Vol. 5 No. 14 (Aug. 2, 1856): 110. Ezra Gannett, *The Atlantic Telegraph: A Discourse Delivered in the First Church, August 8, 1858*, (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, 1858), 13.

analogy for the modes of Spiritualist communication that had previously seemed as unimaginable as instantaneous communication across the Atlantic. It manifested a subtle and poorly understood force (electricity). But the experience was one of enchantment, and did not imply any inherent faith in the science of the day.

This approach is demonstrated through the often referenced New Motive Power machine built by John Murray Spear. Hailed as a “physical Saviour of the race,” and as revelation “embodied in a model machine,” its construction was guided by revelation rather than principals of engineering.²⁷ The New Motive Power was a material expression of Spear’s metaphysical outlook and millennial vision. It was composed largely out of the materials of electrical engineering—metal plates, wires, and magnets. Spear intended it to be a living machine. It was a microcosm of the union between humanity, technology, and the Spiritual realms, mirroring exactly the millennial change it was expected to affect.²⁸ The possibility was already suggested by the novel experience of electrically mediated disembodied communication. The machine was completely void of electrical engineering principles, appropriately expressing the Spiritualist attitude towards technology. The device ultimately failed. A failure attributed by Andrew Jackson Davis to the miscalculations of the deceased engineers.

The balancing of negative and positive personalities as a way of electrically charging and balancing the séance circle has also been read as a sort of technological enthusiasm. This practice was suggested in a number of periodicals, often in explicitly electrical language.²⁹ The earliest

²⁷ Simon Crosby Hewitt, “The Thing Moves,” in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 222.

²⁸ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 217-228.

²⁹ Phoenix, “An Old Spiritualist—No. 2,” *Banner of Light* Vol. 4, No. 24, (March 12, 1859): 5. A. J. Davis, “The New Motive Power: A. J. Davis at High Rock Cottage,” *The Spiritual Telegraph* Vol. 3 No. 24 (June 10, 1854): 23. N. A. “Doings at the Dunham House—The Philosophy of Spiritualism, as Rapped Out by Dr. Benjamin Franklin,” *Cleveland Plaindealer* (1851) in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 296. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse: Being an Explanation of Modern Mysteries*, (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1851), 91-100. Uriah Clark, *Plain Guide to Spiritualism*, (Boston: William White & Co., 1863), 172.

print suggestion came from Andrew Jackson Davis's 1851 work *The Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse*. He recommended a horseshoe pattern of twelve sitters, placing positive personalities in a near semi-circle around one side of the table, mirrored by negative personalities on the other. These were to be bound together by an electric chord which, depending on what elements were available, was to be constructed from some combination of silk, cotton, steel, silver, and/or copper. The two mediums, who sat at the opening of the horseshoe formed by sitters, functioned as "the substances or needles . . . which the magnetism and electricity of the *twelve* member are to act upon, just as the *horse-shoe magnet* acts upon the piece of iron or steel."³⁰

Davis defined positive personalities as active, intellectual, and sure of themselves. Negative personalities were then passive, affectionate, and lacking certainty. In the spirit world, positivity was typified by the sphere of wisdom, negativity by the sphere of love.³¹ As the *Banner of Light* explained it, "by a positive or male mind we mean such an one . . . who is eccentric, and decides upon the propriety of his own acts without advising with his friends." "A female or negative mind is such as requires the advice of its friends before action of any kind—is not self-sufficient, [and] is wanting in executive power."³² Established ideas of female passivity and male independence were recoded into a register of electrical science, which was freely mixed with mystical justifications (twelve being the ideal number for a circle because "there are twelve elements and attributes in every human soul").³³ As Sconce has already argued, "In a bid for . . . authority, Spiritualism attempted to align itself with the principles of 'electrical science' so as to distinguish mediumship from more 'superstitious' forms of mystical belief in previous

³⁰ Davis, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse*, 98-99.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 92-96.

³² Phoenix, "An Old Spiritualist—No 2," 5.

³³ Davis, *Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse*, 96.

centuries.”³⁴ The electrical language was once again vague. It had very little to do with electricity as such, and was primarily justified by analogy. As in the case of science, the frequent use of electricity as a register for discussing Spiritualist practice was a claim to legitimacy, rather than a naïve confusion between the work of the engineer and the medium. Nevertheless, the concept of electricity did have a practical application as a metaphysical solvent. Through the telegraph, electricity had dissolved the boundary of distance for communication. Spiritualists extended the power of electricity, dissolving the boundaries of death and selfhood through a strategically vague imagining of the force as one that connected all life, cutting through the boundaries of space, time, death, and self. The formulation was not scientific. But the analogy was obvious and the claim to legitimacy convenient.

Reform

Spiritualism was closely associated with the larger causes of nineteenth-century liberal reform. Just how extensive or practically productive this relationship was is an ongoing debate within the historiography. The open question is whether Spiritualism was a productive tool for reform, or if there was only a loose sense of solidarity between the two separate subcultures due to their shared sense of marginality.³⁵ Just how productive Spiritualist rhetoric was for liberal reform and women’s rights is beyond the scope of this work. What is relevant is the fact that the rhetoric of reform, which ran throughout Spiritualist periodicals and lectures, was not an explicit element of material mediumship. This serves as a further justification for placing material mediums on the margins of the larger movement.

³⁴ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 28.

³⁵ For more on Spiritualism as productive of reform, see: Braude, *Radical Spirits*; and Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990). For more on Spiritualism and reform as an unproductive alliance, see: Moore, *In Search of White Crows*. Cox, *Body and Soul*.

Before the Spiritualist lecture circuit developed in the early 1850s, very few women were given the opportunity to speak to public assemblies. The few that did were generally religious figures, and their public appearances were extremely controversial.³⁶ The Spiritualist solution was not ideal. Male spirits validated women's speech, but only by reducing the women themselves to empty receptors for male wisdom. "The assertion that the passivity that gave women access to spirits made them morally unaccountable undercut women's claim to spiritual authority."³⁷ Despite this uncomfortable compromise (Spiritualist feminists had to make many uncomfortable compromises), the lecture circuit paved the way for later feminist reform speakers.

As female Spiritualists achieved celebrity status on the lecture circuits, they found their ways into Spiritualist periodicals. While Moore may have been correct in arguing that Spiritualist reform was limited to rhetoric, the rhetoric of these periodicals exposed the nation to new conceptions of marriage that exposed the absurdity and danger of the mother/whore binary that had dominated in the cult of true womanhood. Spiritualist writers framed marriage as a particularly brutal form of prostitution and engendered a social consciousness amongst women that exposed the exploitation of the patriarchal legal system across class boundaries.³⁸

Expository arguments on the need of reform obviously fell to writers and lecturers rather than to material mediums. However, there is an interdependence between explicitly gendered politics, the conflict with institutional science and medicine, and the larger Spiritualist project of repairing a fractured society. Material mediums demonstrated the failure of reigning materialist and church sanctioned ontologies. This is not to say that material mediums were in any sense

³⁶ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 89-91.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 117-142.

active reformers. Rather, they operated within the same coherent epistemic strategy that allowed and encouraged other mediums to explicitly reject institutionally sanctioned boundaries around the possible roles and liberties granted to women in nineteenth-century America.

Rationality

Closely associated with the concept of Spiritualism as a positivist movement, is the concept of Spiritualism as a rational movement. If rationality is understood in the Scottish Enlightenment sense, then Spiritualism was a rational movement. Spiritualists fully embraced the nineteenth-century individualism that granted each person agency and a rational mind, able to access truth for him or herself. In this sense at least it was, as John Modern suggested, “the liberal extension of liberal Protestantism.”³⁹ Rather than yoking Spiritualism to scientism, this rationalism and implied individualism offered a means of challenging institutional knowledge.

Modern’s use of spirituality as an emerging style of piety brought to light the deeper implications of Spiritualist rationality. He defined spirituality as direct knowledge of the self and the networks of relationality around the self.⁴⁰ It was not a process of disenchantment, but rather a process of navigating relations through natural faculties of reason, culminating in a negation of dread and a domestication of spirits.⁴¹ While Modern saw a number of Protestant subcultures participating in this new formation of piety, Spiritualism’s specific aim was “a material confirmation of an invisible order.”⁴² And this invisible order included both the abstract republic and the increasingly immaterial networks of electrical and steam driven technology spreading

³⁹ John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America: With Reference to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines, and Their Metaphors; Featuring Discussions of Mass Media, Moby-Dick, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and Sex With the New Motive Power*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 40.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 165-171.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 223.

across the country.⁴³ Modern's work implied the same themes of mediation presented by Sconce but took them well beyond the telegraph, into the networks of institutional authority targeted explicitly by expository mediums, and implicitly by material mediums who offered tangible experiences of a subversive ontology.

Robert Cox's 2003 *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* likewise read Spiritualist practice as an attempt to navigate the invisible networks of power and the lived political boundaries around nationality, ideology, race, gender, and individualism.⁴⁴ Unlike Modern, Cox understood Spiritualism as an attempt to transcend the heterogeneous distinctions that produced conflict and maintained orthodox patriarchal authority. As the *Banner of Light* explained in 1857, ignorance of "elements connected with earth and its surroundings—elements connecting the mind with the body, the immortal with the mortal, the invisible with the visible—is the foundation of all our errors connected with higher existence."⁴⁵ In order to transcend fracturing distinctions and the networks that maintained them, Spiritualists adopted a style of rationality that held up emotion as equally valid to traditional reason for individual investigations of truth. As indicated in the title of his work, Cox took sympathy as the primary emotion for investigating and transcending societal boundaries. "Spiritualists articulated a theory of community predicated upon the social practice of sympathetic communion, a transcendent nexus of emotion that connected and coordinated all of life and death."⁴⁶

In this view, Harmonialism, reform, and non-institutional medicine resonated with Spiritualism on a much deeper level than shared marginality. These ideologies shared a foundational belief in the natural unity and harmony of the universe. Any boundaries that

⁴³ Ibid., 40-41.

⁴⁴ Cox, *Body and Soul*, 71-73.

⁴⁵ N. A. "Philosophy and Practical Teachings of Spiritualism," *Banner of Light* Vol. 1, No. 11, (April 11, 1857): 5.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 70.

distanced or set the individual against the larger totality of existence were taken as illusory aberrations that threatened both the individual and the larger unbounded imagined community.

There were limits to how far Spiritualists were able to imagine erasure of boundaries. Gendered differences were coded into the Spiritualist worldview, and the afterlife often upheld the racial distinctions of antebellum America. Nevertheless, these boundaries were weakened so far as Spiritualist imagination would allow. Gender was frequently abstracted from biological sex. Racial differences were abstracted from the economics and violence that codified them in American society (a formulation which served as political justification for both abolitionist and pro-slavery Spiritualists in imagining alternative racial relationships).

Cox's lens is the most helpful formulation for moving forward with an analysis of material mediums. Material mediums erased the very bounds of materiality in their performances. The spirits could be anywhere, and with a physicality that could hold and touch. Through trance lecture, Spiritualists had demonstrated the permeability of the body as boundary. Personalities could come and go. Information could enter unmediated by physical senses. In material séances, mediums demonstrated that the body itself could exist unbounded. It could appear and vanish. It could play instruments and lift mediums, producing material effects with or without a visible corporeality.

Conclusion

Spiritualist rhetoric engaged the themes first identified by Moore— scientific investigation, technology, gender politics, and reform. But these were engaged both as specific sites of societal fracture and as opportunities to claim legitimacy. The two uses were interdependent, as these kinds of claims to legitimacy undermined institutional ontologies that produced fracture. In taking Spiritualist rhetoric at face value, historians have marginalized

material mediums as operating outside of the movement's central concerns. However, material mediums were fully engaged with the movement's larger project of repairing sites of societal fracture in order to restore an imagined harmonized totality.

Material mediums opened up private, typically domestic spaces, into public sites of sympathetic bodily communion. At the heart of the material séance is the desire to be touched by a body that was previously assumed to be absolutely separated by the boundaries of death, space, and time. Spiritualists' abstraction of the gendered personality from the biological body has been well covered. What still needs to be addressed is the way material mediums abstracted bodily possibilities from spatial and temporal limitations.

The historiography has been fractured by the isolation of political sites of Spiritualist conflict. By building on Cox's formulation of a sympathetic Spiritualism, interpretation can bring these individual political into a sort of harmony. At the heart of Spiritualism was the paradoxical project of achieving a stable totality in society by removing the stabilizing bounds around selfhood. It necessarily engaged with boundaries of gender, race, class, and nationality, as well as the boundary producing scientific, religious, economic, and political institutions that imposed structure on these sites. To reduce Spiritualism to any one of these sites, or to treat any one in isolation, necessarily results in an imagining of Spiritualism as a poorly organized collection of marginalized individuals hampered by a naïve strategy of radical openness. The logic of Spiritualism only emerges when the diverse concerns and strategies of the movement are read together, bound by the foundational emphasis on sympathy.

CHAPTER 2

REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEBODY: VARIETIES AND APPLICATIONS OF MATERIAL MEDIUMSHIP

Material mediumship was, like all mediumistic practice, widely open to innovation and not strictly demarcated from other forms of mediumship. Though there was no canonical typology, common mediumistic categories included trance, rapping, writing, seeing, healing, prophetic, clairvoyant, pictorial, speaking, musical, and material. Any one medium likely operated in at least two or three of these modes. In the case of trance mediumship—and the closely related prophetic, clairvoyant, and speaking mediumship—spirits communed through the mind of the medium. In material mediumship—and its own attendant forms of rapping, writing, and musical mediumship—the medium operated as a point for spirits to enter into and interact with the material space of the séance circle. Material mediumship was less mediated than the more visible and refined form of trance mediumship, giving sitters direct access to the spirits. In either case, séances were an interaction between sitters and mediums. Styles of mediumship were heavily shaped by audience expectations. This was especially true for those mediums activated at a young age with the guidance and professional management of older male relatives. In order to make sense of any mediumship, it is essential to look at what sort of experience sitters were hoping for. In the case of material mediumship, sitters sought physical points of communion with the spirits. The climax of the séance came with the moment of touch.

As the infamous case of Florence Cook demonstrated, touch was particularly risky for the medium. Florence Cook was a materialization medium, at her séances she would retire out of sight—into a cabinet—and summon fully materialized spirits. In December, 1873, as the spirit Katie King gave each sitter a chance to touch her hand, the sitter and rival Spiritualist William

Volckman grabbed the manifestation, trying to wrestle Katie King to the ground in an attempt to expose her as the medium in disguise. Though the crowd intervened and prevented him from finding any evidence of fraud, the impious display and accusations were enough to permanently damage Cook's credibility.⁴⁷ Florence Cook was fortunate to escape with nothing more than her professional reputation damaged. Exposure could result in criminal charges of fraud or medical charges of insanity. This illustrates the tension material mediums had to operate within, satisfying audience demands for more, while evading a legal and medical system that was itself experimenting with unpredictable and inconsistent modes of policing. It is not surprising then that material mediums were often reluctant to facilitate this touch. Some mediums used letters as alternative points of material connection. Some only offered touch after sitters had established a rapport with the medium. Whatever the case, sitters craved material points of interpersonal connection across time and space.

There was no set formula for a material séance. The most frequent elements were rapping, table tipping, music, levitation, writing, and materialization. Material séances removed the boundaries around the body, allowing shared corporeal experiences between the living and the dead. When touch was not offered, handwritten letters or signatures frequently took its place. More than rapping or trance channeling, letters offered sitters a physical point of communion. Viewed through Robert Cox's formulation of a sympathetic Spiritualism that aimed to transcend societal boundaries, these important sites of physical communion transcended the spatial and material boundaries around bodies and bodily communications.

As Spiritualism developed in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, full bodied manifestation became increasingly common and public. By the 1870s touch was readily

⁴⁷ Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 67, 257.

available to the masses at camp demonstrations. Braude read this shift as a sign of how far Spiritualism had slipped from its antebellum reform roots. However, when read against antebellum material mediumship (rather than against antebellum trance mediumship) this shift emerges as a progression of professional mediums' ability to satisfy the audiences' desires for bodily contact. The patriarchal and violent eroticism highlighted by Braude and implied in the binding and gagging of mediums on stage (common in the 1870s) may have been less explicit in the 1850s, but it was present.⁴⁸ One need only look at the exploitative strip search and binding of the adolescent Fox girls by an investigatory committee in 1849, accompanied by a narrative of their spiritual awakening that involved the spirits tearing off the girls' clothes nightly and violently shaking the bed until the girls took to sleeping on the floor.⁴⁹ In exploring the boundaries of bodily communion with spirits, violence and eroticism (as two primary modes of traditional bodily communion) were easily implied. Though anathema to the Spiritualist ethic of repairing a fractured society, experimenting with sites of bodily communion and societal fracture occasionally drifted into an ugly "material confirmation of an invisible order."⁵⁰ This was particularly evident in the earliest manifestations, before the important relationship between mediumistic abilities and sitter expectations had fully developed.

Early Phenomena

The role of mesmerism and the Shaker era of manifestation as forbearers of Spiritualism has been well covered. Much less has been said about the role of the German poltergeist. However, as Capron and Baron highlighted, the early narratives of mediums awakening to their gifts closely paralleled this tradition. Over time, categories of mediumship were defined and

⁴⁸ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 175-176.

⁴⁹ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 37-38, 45.

⁵⁰ Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 223.

reified through practice and print. But in the earliest days of the movement, material phenomena was frequent and unbounded. The spirits were often dangerous and cruel in a way hard to imagine from later accounts of a tame and harmonious afterlife, suggesting once again that—prior to sympathetic transcendence—Spiritualists did, as Modern argued, manifest “a material confirmation of an invisible order.”⁵¹ In the earliest days of manifestations, it was a material confirmation of an intensely violent and chaotic order.

Most histories of Spiritualism present some brief account of the initial rappings at Hydesville, but there has been very little examination of the larger narratives produced around that initial thinning of the veil. Months after establishing their rapping communication with the murdered peddler through the infamous invitation, “here Mr. Split-foot, do as I do,” spirit activity in the Fox home went far beyond the polite back and forth of those first communications.⁵²

The furniture was frequently moved about; the girls were often clasped by hard, cold hands; doors were opened and shut with much violence, their beds were so shaken that they were compelled to “camp out,” as they termed it, on the ground; their bed-clothes were dragged from off them, and the very floor and house made to rock as in an earthquake. Night after night they would be appalled by hearing a sound like a death struggle, the gurgling of the throat, a sudden rush as of falling blood, the dragging as if of a helpless body across the room and down the cellar stairs; the digging of a grave, nailing of boards, and the filling up as of a new-made grave.⁵³

Though the family tried to escape the disturbances, first by sending Kate to Rochester (the youngest and most metaphysically active daughter), and later relocating the entire family to Rochester, there was no reprise. The spirits followed and increased their activity, spreading into the household of the eldest sister, Leah Fish. Soon Leah’s own daughter was waking up the

⁵¹ Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 223.

⁵² Margaret Fox, “Certificate of Mrs. Margaret Fox, Wife of John D. Fox, The Occupant of the House,” in A. Leah Underhill, *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism*, (New York: Thomas R. Knox & Co., 1885), 7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 38

household, screaming as cold hands groped her in her bed.⁵⁴ The Spirits increased their violence, attacking Leah's soon to be husband, Calvin Brown. "They persecuted him by intelligent signs and movements of so violent erratic, and even spiteful a character, as to compel him at last to own and respect their power."⁵⁵ The family also began receiving physical communications around this time. The spirits "often threw about the house blocks of wood with sentences written on them for the encouragement and instruction of the family."⁵⁶

As Frank Podmore already suggested, most of the details in the more elaborate accounts of Hydesville and the aftermath at Rochester took some time to appear. And most came from a single source, the eldest of the Fox sisters, Leah, who was thirty-four when the rappings began. As a medium herself, and as her sisters' manager, Leah had a professional interest in the production of the Hydesville narrative. Nevertheless, her expanded narrative of the Hydesville rappings found traction in Spiritualist publications, and was validated by similar narratives of mediumistic awakenings.

Two years after the Hydesville rappings, Spiritualists were paying close attention to Rev. Dr. Phelps and his family in Stratford, Connecticut. In assessing the case, Leah Fox Underhill suggested that the spirits involved may have been insane. Spirits smashed windows. Tables levitated. Turnips carved with hieroglyphics grew out of the carpet. Spirits often appeared bodily, but would not communicate. They tore the clothes off of the eldest boy. They lit his bed on fire, and "a pillow was drawn over the elder girl's face when she was sleeping peacefully and a piece of tape tied round her neck with such violence that it all but strangled her."⁵⁷ The case was so highly publicized amongst Spiritualists that Andrew Jackson Davis visited the family to

⁵⁴ Ibid., 33-34.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism*, (London: Methuen & Co., 1902), 194-197.

investigate. He personally spoke with five spirits in the home and translated the hieroglyphic language on the turnips. Davis found that it was indeed genuine Spiritualist phenomena.⁵⁸

The hostility of the early phenomena never completely vanished. Spiritualists continued to acknowledge the occasional troublesome spirit, but not with the same degree of frequent violence portrayed in these early accounts. Early on, trance lecturers and the Spiritualist periodicals settled on and promoted an interpretation of spirit phenomena rooted in A. J. Davis' harmonial philosophy. An afterlife defined by ever increasing harmony—by social progress and healing—displaced earlier remnants of spirits in a purgatory state, still violently attached to their deaths.

The earliest sorts of material manifestations were threatening and chaotic. They may not have had much presence beyond their narrative life, but they presented for the first time much of the phenomena that would become standard in later material séances. From the very beginning, Spiritualists promoted belief in the spirits' ability to physically interact with, travel through, and manipulate the material world through a—sometimes visible, sometimes touchable—body. Spiritualists did back away from the violence and hostility of the earliest manifestations. Though a sometimes slow and uneven process, mediums replaced alien hieroglyphs inscribed on turnips with loving hand-written letters from the deceased. They replaced the ice cold touch in the child's bed with the soft and warm touch in the séance circle.

Music

As a variety of material manifestation, music had a particularly emotive power. Spirits rarely created music or any other audible manifestations without material aid. While accounts of

⁵⁸ Ibid.

talking spirits occasionally circulated, these were typically accounts of individuals' visions rather than séance phenomena. There were some exceptions. The murdered peddler in the Fox's basement was not the spirit only to re-enact his death scene. One séance circle in Bridgeport, Connecticut reported that "a spirit who had died by a railway accident produced the sounds of the whistle and locomotive, and besides imitating the sound of escaping steam, succeeded in imparting to more than a dozen people assembled the sense of strong currents of air rushing through the room."⁵⁹ However, most spirits did not dwell on their moment of death so obsessively. Rather, they performed music. And they did so through direct physical interactions with instruments. The vast majority of audible phenomena produced by spirits was through physical interaction. This includes the most common of all Spiritualist phenomena, rapping, which still came down to a spirit striking a physical barrier. In making sense of material mediumship, the defining limitations around the actions spirits were or were not able to carry out matter. They inform us about the modes of interaction between sitters and spirits. The supposed method of production, style of music, quality of performance, and subjective reports go on to inform us about the environment the spirits created for the sitters in the space of the séance circle.

The best known incidents of strong musical manifestations occurred in 1852 in Dover, Ohio, when rural farmer Jonathan Koons began experimenting with Spiritualism. Under the direct direction of spirits, Koons built a small one room log cabin, a space completely set apart for mediumistic practice. Hardinge described the site as "one of the wildest portions of this primitive region, sheltered by tall forests, and swept by the tempestuous blasts that moan through the gorges of hills."⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, the space was designed to facilitate and prescribe the

⁵⁹ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 81.

⁶⁰ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 307.

placement of spectators, with seating around the walls and a very small table in the center reserved for the family mediums.⁶¹ Setting himself apart from his competitors, Koons' manifestations were carried out by a family of 165 pre-Adamic men with uncommon wisdom and physical power.⁶² After construction, the spirits started leaving shopping lists for Koons. The items acquired included "two accordions, bass and tenor drums, tamborine, guitar, banjo, harps and bells, on which spirit perform, and toys which are oftentimes placed in the hands of the audience. A number of pistols were also requested, which were charged and fired by the spirits themselves in rapid succession."⁶³

Mr. Koons had a variety of musical instruments—some hanging up, and others lying on the tables. Upon the table at which we were seated were two violins. Mr. K. took up one of them and drew the bow on it. Immediately the spirits accompanied him on the other violin and on other instruments. Mr. K. then asked the spirits for a vocal accompaniment, which they immediately gave; and I think, if any thing can give an idea of heaven on earth, it must be such music as was made by that angelic band.⁶⁴

Koons was not the first to integrate music. However, his spirit room was hailed in the spiritualist press and literature as the highest example of musical manifestations.

Spirits were rarely praised for their technical skill, but rather for the intense, table shaking, physicality of their performances. For Koons' sitters, "most . . . appear to have been impressed more by the energy than the excellence of the resulting harmony; more than one tells us with pride that the strains could be heard a mile off."⁶⁵

The Fox sisters, having become accomplished material mediums after their sudden rise to celebrity, offer a more typical example of how music was utilized in séance. In 1853, one

⁶¹ Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, 264.

⁶² Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, 248.

⁶³ Jonathan Koons "Letter Written to Editor of the Seraph's Advocate, Published at Syracuse New York," in Dr. J. Everett, *A Book for Skeptics: Being Communications From Angels*, (Columbus: Osgood & Blake Printers, 1853), 23.

⁶⁴ Stephen Dudley, "Buffalo, Dec. 15th, 1854," in S. B. Brittan, *Telegraph Papers* vol. vii, (New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1855), 249.

⁶⁵ Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, 247.

Spiritualist recounted a sitting with the three sisters where he placed three bells on a drawer under the séance table. "The bells were played upon in a sort of melodious and rhythmical chime, whilst numerous raps were made, as if keeping time to a march. When the raps ceased the bells rang violently for several minutes; they were also pressed on my feet and knocked most vehemently against the under side of the table, raising up the candlesticks by the concussion."⁶⁶ The privileging of musical energy or liveliness over musical skill may well have been necessitated by the means of producing such music. Regardless, the result was a style of music and musical appreciation that focused on the energy and physicality of the music rather than on the virtuosity of performance. Felt music, music that shook the table or sounded loudly enough to be heard "a mile off" signified the strong presence of the spirits.⁶⁷ In many cases, including both of the above cited examples, the music was the immediate precursor to the true climax of the séance: the touch of the materialized spirit.

Writing

While touch was the ultimate moment of communion between the living and the dead, it was not always available. Touch was dangerous. Darkness and distance were the primary tools of the careful material medium. Writing became an important stand in for those sitters who craved tangible, material points of connection with the deceased. Writing took many forms. The accounts from sitters demonstrate the handwritten letter from a deceased loved one as the emotional pinnacle of written phenomena. However, in the ongoing project to resist the fractures born of particularity, mediums resisted the bounds of linguistic closure. Hieroglyphics, ancient languages, and the closely related phenomena of glossolalia flourished as Spiritualists worked to

⁶⁶ Nathaniel P. Tallmadge, "Letter to Helen N. Whitman," (Baltimore: April 12, 1853), in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 90.

⁶⁷ Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, 247.

loosen the limiting boundaries around linguistic communication. Writing took three primary forms. The most popular was the physical use of pencil and paper by a partially materialized spirit, whether seen or hidden behind some barrier. The second was through the spirit's control of the medium's hand. This led to the production of a number of treatises on Spiritualist philosophy, but was nearly absent from the actual performance of material séances. The final mode, less frequently used but by no means uncommon, was the sudden appearance of the written word on the medium's body, highlighting once again the importance of bodily communion as well as the lack of boundary around the body itself.

Interestingly, the most widely publicized spirit writings of the 1850s came from the younger brother of famous phrenologists and publishing magnates Orson Squire Fowler and Lorenzo Niles Fowler, who—however indirectly—had done a great deal to perpetuate Spiritualism themselves with the publication of Capron and Barron's widely read *Singular Revelations Explanation and History of the Mysterious Communion With Spirits* in 1850.

Edward P. Fowler was a medical student and member of the New York Circle in November, 1851, when a small party of visible spirits—including Benjamin Franklin and founder of homeopathy Samuel Hahnemann—started visiting him late at night.⁶⁸ The New York Circle was itself incredibly productive of Spiritualist print culture. Prominent Spiritualist writers John W. Edmonds and George Bush commonly participated. As did Samuel Byron Brittan and Charles Partridge, who together were responsible for the publication of several of the most

⁶⁸ Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, 236-237. Edward P. Fowler, "Edward Fowler's Communications," November, 1851, in John W. Edmonds and George T. Dexter, *Spiritualism*, 4th ed. (New York: Partridge & Brittan, 1853), 449.

widely circulated Spiritualist periodicals and a number of Spiritualist books, the most notable being the *Spiritual Telegraph* and the associated *Telegraph Papers*.⁶⁹

In their nightly visits the five spirits (seemingly led by Franklin) placed mysterious boxes, overflowing with odic light, around Fowler's bedroom, making up the apparatus through which the spirits could interact with the material of the room.⁷⁰ The objects they engaged were decidedly literary. "Books were conveyed through the air from one box to the other, the electrical or odic lights or forces operating upon a book in a manner similar to that described in respect to the pen and table. The books started rapidly, moderated their speed, and descended toward the floor midway in their passage, and then increased their speed and altitude as they approached the other box."⁷¹

The texts that came out of these animating sessions were written in Hebrew, Arabic, Bengali, and French. Fowler and all other official members of the New York Circle insisted on their complete ignorance of the former three. Importantly, prior to Professor George Bush's translation, Fowler claimed the Bengali passages were written in Sanskrit, and Emma Hardinge went on to erroneously claim that Professor Bush had identified the passages as such.⁷² As Tomoko Masuzawa demonstrated in *The Invention of World Religions*, nineteenth-century philology emphasized Hebrew, Arabic, and Sanskrit as foundational languages of civilization, containing the essence of their respective regions and often indicating idealized cultural pinnacles that were lost to history in the non-European world.⁷³ These languages themselves

⁶⁹ Charles Partridge "Testimony of the New York Circle," in S. B. Britten, *The Shenikah*, vol I, (New York: S. B. Britten, 1852) 304. Ann Braude, "News From the Spirit World: A Checklist of American Spiritualist Periodicals, 1847-1900," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* Vol. 99, No. 2 (Oct., 1989), 399-462.

⁷⁰ Fowler, "Edward Fowler's Communications," 443-451.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 448.

⁷² Fowler, "Edward Fowler's Communications," 449-450. George Bush, "Letter From Prof. Bush," March 27, 1852, in S. B. Britten, *The Shenikah*, vol I, (New York: S. B. Britten, 1852), 305-307. Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 101-102.

⁷³ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 147-178.

were the message. At first glance the French seems anomalous, Greek would have been the natural fit for a sacred Euro-linguistic presence. Nevertheless, Fowler's writings produced tangible (and through the Spiritualist press distributable) connections. The Spirits were connected to the purest ancient traditions that produced civilizations. In written form, these ancient traditions were harmoniously co-existent, and they were irrupting into nineteenth-century America through their mass distribution in the pages of *The Shenikah*.⁷⁴

The frequent phenomena of writings in hieroglyphics and various unearthly spirit languages functioned similarly to Fowler's texts in that they offered material points of connection between worlds. But unearthly writings necessitated interpretation through revelation, which greatly deepened the level of communion between author and reader. Though not an aspect of material mediumship, the closely related practice of speaking in and interpreting tongues or unknown foreign languages was fairly common in the broader antebellum Spiritualist movement.⁷⁵ Locating Spiritualism's place in the lineage of American charismatic movements is beyond the scope of this work. Nevertheless, the presence of glossolalia alongside unearthly spirit writing demonstrates the complex relationship Spiritualists had with language, as a site of interpersonal connection, and as a means of manifesting and bringing together the foreign, ancient, and otherworldly.⁷⁶

Whereas foreign and otherworldly writings brought abstract worlds into communion with one another, letters from the deceased did the same for individuals, once again negating boundaries of time, space, and death. All texts—no matter how mundane—achieve this to some

⁷⁴ S. B. Britten, *The Shenikah*, vol I, 302.

⁷⁵ Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, 258-262. Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 101, 156.

⁷⁶ For more on early American glossolalia see: Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Kathryn Lofton, "Piety, Practice, and Ritual," in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion in America* ed. Phillip Goff, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 243-246. Lee Copeland, "Speaking in Tongues in the Restoration Churches," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* vol. 24 no. 1 (1991): 13-33.

degree. But the Spiritualist logic of sympathy made it possible for practitioners to experience this transcendent quality of text with much less mediation than print culture generally allowed.

Rather than experiencing letters as ideas removed and preserved, Spiritualists typically experienced letters from the deceased as material points of connection that established a fixed presence of the author, one much more tangible and felt than the presence implied by rapping or table tipping. It does not take a Spiritualist to appreciate the obvious emotive power of a deceased loved one's handwriting.

Calling these documents 'letters' is a liberal use of the term. Single sentences or isolated signatures were the norm. Once again, the writing itself, rather than the sentiment communicated in the prose, was the principal message. The writing had the power of presence, and its material form had the promise of tangible connection.

Though neither a medium nor a particularly prolific writer, Nathaniel Tallmadge had a notable presence in Spiritualist print culture—no doubt due to the legitimacy suggested by his long political career, first as a senator from New York and later as Governor of the Wisconsin territory. His testimony is evocative of just how powerful such letters could be. Sitting with the three Fox sisters and their mother Margaret, Tallmadge asked his deceased friend John Calhoun, "Can you *do* any thing . . . to confirm me in the truth of these revelations, and to remove from my mind the least shadow of unbelief?"⁷⁷ Despite witnessing dramatic rappings, spirit music, and levitations over a series of sittings with the Foxes, Tallmadge continued to look for suitable confirmation. When the Foxes finally prepared implements for spirit writing, Tallmadge requested:

My friend, I wish the sentence to be in you own handwriting, so that your friends will recognize it. He replied: You will know the writing. . . . I soon heard a rapid movement of the pencil on the paper, and a rustling of the paper, together with a movement of the

⁷⁷ Tallmadge, "Letter to Helen N. Whitman," 475.

drawer. . . . On raising up the drawer I discovered the paper all under it. The sheets were a little deranged, and on examining I found on the outside sheet these words: 'I'm with you still.'⁷⁸

Though this was certainly one of the least dramatic events recounted by Tallmadge from his time with the Foxes, it was the one manifestation that gave him the certainty he was seeking.

This 'sentence' is perfectly characteristic of Calhoun. It contains his terseness of style and his condensation of thought. It is a text from which volumes might be written. It proves, 1. The immortality of the soul. 2. The power of spirits to revisit the earth. 3. Their ability to communicate with relatives and friends. 4. The identity of the spirit to all eternity. How one's soul expands with these sublime conceptions! How resistless is this testimony of their truth! How surprising that men can doubt, when this flood of living light is poured upon them by spirits.⁷⁹

As argued in the previous chapter, Spiritualism operated with a rationality that privileged emotion as the primary method for evaluating truth claims. Though levitation, spirit music, table tipping, and rapping conversations were enough to maintain Tallmadge's patronage of the Fox sisters, such phenomena lacked the emotive power to truly convince.

Decades later staunch skeptic and frequent Spiritualist debunker Harry Houdini poignantly conveyed the affective power that letters held for Spiritualist sitters. "I was *willing* to believe, even *wanted* to believe. It was weird to me and with a beating heart I waited, hoping that I might feel once more the presence of my beloved Mother." "As she finished each page, Sir Arthur [Conan Doyle] tore the sheet off and handed it to me. I sat serene through it all, hoping and wishing that I might feel my mother's presence. There wasn't even a semblance of it."⁸⁰

Though Houdini's letter failed to deliver the feeling of presence he was hoping for, his rare lapse into the Spiritualist logic of emotion illustrated the practical role letters played in material séances. Mirroring the emphasis on the physicality of spirit music over skillful performance,

⁷⁸ Ibid., 480-481.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 481-482.

⁸⁰ Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924), 152.

sitters emphasized the undeniable *presence* implied in the spirit letter over the prose content—presence being the necessary condition for sympathetic communion

Touch

A close look at the narratives produced around the material séances highlights the centrality of touch as the climactic moment in the material séance. Though historians have emphasized the lack of full body materializations before the 1870s, partial manifestations (specifically hands) were always a frequent and defining characteristic of Spiritualism. Hands played music, wrote messages, and moved objects. But most importantly, they touched people.

Touch was not always readily available. In some instances it was stolen. As one of D. D. Home's sitters recounted:

The hand again appeared, was seen to take the bell from the table and place it in the hands, first of one, and then of another of the party. . . . Slipping my hand over the bell, I grasped the hand that held it, desiring some more tangible knowledge of its character than that afforded by sight. It was a real hand—it had knuckles, fingers, and finger-nails; and what was yet more curious (if possible), it was soft and warm, feeling much like the hand of an infant in every respect but that of size.⁸¹

In other instances the opportunity was missed completely. One account from the *Spiritual Telegraph* told of a mother who was overtaken by yearning at the sight of her young daughter in the odic lights. “Upon the mother’s involuntary approach toward the vision with outstretched arms, in an instinctive desire to retain the presence of her child, it vanished altogether.”⁸²

Spiritualist periodicals had a standardizing effect on material séances. Whenever a piece was published on some new mode of material manifestation, the practice was reproduced throughout the nation. As periodicals increasingly expressed sitters’ excitement and yearning around the

⁸¹ N. A. “Hartford, March 18, 1853,” *Hartford Times*, in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 106.

⁸² B., “Spiritualism in Washington: The Ring Experiment—A Great Test—Spirit-lights,” *Spiritual Telegraph* no. 20 vol. 2 no. 40, (Feb., 4, 1854), 158.

spirits' touch, mediums integrated touch as a standard practice. And Spiritualists increasingly discussed touch as the climactic moment of the Spiritualist séance.

The incredible dramatics of Jonathan Koons' spirit room are only hinted at in the above treatment of its musical phenomena and reputation. Though best known for music, Koons' mediumship included writing, levitations, partial materializations, odic lights, and occasional spirit voices through the trumpet. Despite all of this, the emphasis given in the opening lines of John B. Wolff's account of his visit to Ohio (written for the *Spiritual Telegraph*) was typical of material séance narratives.

I am now at J. Koons', where the wonderful manifestations occur. I have had one extended and one brief interview with the Spirits. My previous experience is fully corroborated. I have again seen them, talked with them, and shook hands with them, as really and *substantially* as one man shakes hands with another. This process is a *bona fide* transaction; not like the act of shaking hands with Spirits by clairvoyants, but the hand is a hand, and no mistake.⁸³

Séance accounts featuring touch almost always privileged the phenomena through reflection in their opening or closing lines. Touch elicited a variety of emotional responses including excitement, conviction, intrigue, and (occasionally) dread. Whatever the particular response, the emotional impact of touch was undeniable.

As already alluded to, the Spiritualist use of emotion as a valid and direct means of evaluation truth claims was grounded in Scottish common sense philosophy. "The first principles of morals are not deductions. They are self-evident; and their truth, like that of other axioms, is perceived without reasoning or deductions."⁸⁴ While Spiritualists did develop innovative practices for eliciting and directing emotion, the use of emotion as a moral and trustworthy sense

⁸³ John B. Wolff "Letter from Milfield, Dover Tp., Athens Co., O., Nov. 5, 1853," in S. B. Brittan, *Spiritual Telegraph Papers* vol. iii, (New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1854), 267.

⁸⁴ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, (Edinburgh: John Bell, Parliament-Square, and G. G. J. & Robinson, 1788), 482.

was firmly grounded in the ideas of Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and Thomas Brown.⁸⁵ For most of the nineteenth-century, theologians schooled in Scottish Common Sense Realism dominated at Harvard, Yale, Andover, and Princeton, keeping the philosophy alive and highly visible in the Northeast.⁸⁶

As a school of thought, Scottish Common Sense Realism was dynamic and varied. Nevertheless, certain foundational postulates stayed relatively intact, including the absolute necessity of emotion for making moral judgments.⁸⁷ This formulation for the most part adhered to Thomas Reid's original argument: "In moral deliberation, we must be acquainted before-hand with all objects and their relations. After these things are known, the understanding has no further room to operate. Nothing remains but to feel, on our part, some sentiment of blame or approbation."⁸⁸ Scottish Common Sense thinkers divided the self into intellect, emotions, and will.⁸⁹ Each faculty had a particular role to play in allowing the individual to make sense of and interact with the world outside of the self. Intellect allowed for deductive reasoning and judgment, arranging sensory information into coherent thought. Emotions offered a moral sense for grounding the otherwise cold deductions of the intellect. And the will motivated the individual to act on the basis of his or her intellectual deductions and emotional impressions.

In the nineteenth-century, Scottish Common Sense Realism merged with medicalization for an increasingly physiological understanding of the self. Emotion mattered, but was secondary

⁸⁵ John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 294.

⁸⁶ Sydney Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *Church History* 24, no. 3 (1955): 262-267. For more on American dissemination of Scottish Common Sense Realisms see: John Corrigan, "Habits from the Heart: The American Enlightenment and Religious Ideas about Emotion and Habit," *The Journal of Religion* 73, no. 2 (1993): 183-199.

⁸⁷ Cox, *Body and Soul*, 24-25. Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," 261. Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, 294-295.

⁸⁸ Reid, *Active Powers of Man*, 485.

⁸⁹ Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, 295. Corrigan, "Habits from the Heart," 194. Cox, *Body and Soul*, 24-25. Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology."

to the body. This process led to the development of what John Corrigan called “the double self.”⁹⁰ Individuals were constructed as both feeling, thinking subjectivities, and as objectified mechanical processes. The double self created a difficult paradox for Protestants and Spiritualists alike. Spiritualists validated the former subjective self while rebelling against the latter mechanical self. They maintained the direct relationship between body and emotion, as evidenced by the sectarian medical practices popularized by Spiritualist periodicals (a cultural realm that overlapped heavily with liberal Protestants). But Spiritualists reversed the common formulation, privileging the emotional self as primary and body as secondary. The body suffered when the emotional self was out of harmony with nature.⁹¹ Whether through revivalism, sectarian healing, or the later metaphysical movements of Christian Science and New Thought, the theological attempt to maintain or restore a subjective selfhood threatened by a mechanical universe was a broad project in nineteenth and twentieth-century America.

Though material mediums were not unique in their goal of restoring and validating an emotional self as primary, their specific practice of eliciting emotional connections through an embodied other—abstracted from space and time—was a novel formulation. The historical circumstances which opened up the possibility for this emotional touch will be the subject of the following chapter.

In January, 1850, the Fox sisters and their mother Margaret granted a private sitting to Reverend Charles Hammond. “On taking our positions the sounds were heard, and continued to multiply and become more violent until every part of the room trembled with their demonstrations.” As the Fox women sang Spiritualist hymns the sounds increased. A hand materialized, “resembling a shadow,” and touched the Reverend’s face as unseen hands tapped

⁹⁰ Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, 2-7.

⁹¹ Albanese, “Physics and Metaphysics in Nineteenth-Century America.”

and pulled at his body. Curtains furled and unfurled. Furniture shook violently. “Two small drawers in a bureau played back and forth with inconceivable rapidity,” and the inexplicable noises continually increased. Yet, after presenting all of this dramatic and disconcerting phenomena, Hammond recalled: “These were among many other demonstrations which I witnessed that evening, amid which I felt a perfect self-possession, and in no instance the slightest embarrassment, except a momentary chill when the cold hand was applied to my face, similar to a sensation I have realized when touching a dead body.”⁹² Despite the obvious sensationalism of the material manipulations, touch was once again isolated as the one manifestation strong enough to provoke a powerful emotional response.

Furthermore, touch—like letters—had the power to instill certainty. In her own conversion narrative, Emma Hardinge recalled her great difficulty in reconciling her budding mediumistic gifts with her distrust of Spiritualism—which dually stemmed from an earlier encounter with a blasphemous spirit as well as Hardinge’s personal distrust of her teacher, Leah Brown (formerly Leah Fox). Hardinge spent “many Sunday evenings” with Leah Brown before she was convinced. But finally, in a darkened room, she “felt a large and heavy hand on [her] back.” Looking around the room, Hardinge only saw those seated at the table, their hands were all engaged in the formation of the circle, visible and held by their respective neighbors.⁹³

I mentally requested that the hand should stroke my head, when instantly a warm, soft, though large hand gently patted my forehead and stroked each side of my face. . . . I again mentally requested that the hand should touch my mother, who was sitting at the further end of our long table. ‘Good heavens! There is a hand laid upon my head,’ uttered by mamma the very moment after framing this unspoken wish, convinced me that if ankle joints were the originators of the Rochester knockings, their action in the persons of the Fox family were, of all the world’s phenomena, the most marvellous, omnipresent, locomotive, independent, and intelligent.⁹⁴

⁹² Charles Hammond, “Letter from the Rev. C. Hammond,” in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 50-51.

⁹³ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 249-252.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 252.

By this point in her mediumistic development, Hardinge had already successfully channeled a variety of spirits and had produced several pieces of spirit writing. Her recollections demonstrated an intense desire to believe.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, her anxiety over the possibility of self-deception was persistent. Though the touch was completely anonymous and facilitated by a medium Hardinge was reluctant to trust, it finally gave her the justification to believe. Disembodied personalities might have been naïve self-deceptions. And impersonal knocks or manipulations were poor conductors for establishing meaningful emotional connections. But a touch—a felt external bodily presence—offered an *other*, allowing for real, tangible, sympathetic communion.

If looked at solely in terms of the dramatic manifestations produced, material séances are easily mischaracterized as sensational novelties that capitalized on Spiritualism's popularity while undermining the dignified and therapeutic trance mediumship that sought to heal a republic fractured by racism and patriarchy. However, sitters' subjective accounts of material séances demonstrate an earnest desire for material points of connection. Whether with deceased loved ones or unknown spirits, bodily connections mattered. And they imbued the otherwise impersonal spirit feats of material manipulation with emotionally grounded meaning.

Conclusion

This is by no means an exhaustive survey of material séance phenomena. Spirit painting, bodily levitation, and the various peculiar effects of magnetized objects are omitted. Nevertheless, the styles of manifestation emphasized in this chapter mirror those emphasized in sitters' accounts. Despite the obviously dramatic nature of material séances, subjective accounts reveal emotional connection—rather than sensationalism—as the aim of material séances.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 138-140, 249-252.

A loose hierarchy emerges. Rapping opened up communication and established an external presence, but it was an inherently awkward method of communication. Spiritualists were either limited to yes or no questions, or they had to go through the lengthy process of saying the alphabet aloud as spirits spelled out their communications, rapping at the selected letter, one letter at a time. Music, having the inherent power to elicit emotion, brought sitters slightly closer to an experience of interpersonal communion. But listening to music was a passive experience rather than an interaction. And music, though it effectively communicated mood, struggled to communicate distinct selfhoods. The emphasis on the physicality—the felt presence—of spirit music left much to be desired as music is inherently ephemeral. Handwritten letters from deceased loved ones were very emotionally provocative and, through the Spiritualist logic of sympathetic communion, allowed for an immediate sense of presence. They offered tangible points of connection. Similarly, letters written in foreign, ancient, or unearthly languages manifested and reunited abstracted times, places, and spiritual realms. Hieroglyphic writings transcended the disjunction between author and reader through their reliance on direct revelatory interpretation. But in the effort to presence and commune with an *other*—a tangible and distinct selfhood—touch was unparalleled.

CHAPTER 3

ILLIMITABLE SPACE: THE SÉANCE CIRCLE AND THE CREATION OF SOCIAL SPACE-TIME

Material mediums performed material séances. They did not write. In arguing for a particular construction of selfhood within material séances, this chapter will read Spiritualist writings on séance circles and bodies in transit, alongside reading actual séance practice. The sensual experience orchestrated by material mediums will be read alongside nineteenth-century constructions of the senses and spiritualist constructions of the body. This chapter will bring together the primacy of touch, competing nineteenth-century views of selfhood, and the Spiritualist attitude towards science and technology. As previously discussed, Spiritualism worked to repair both a body and a cosmos fractured by mechanical models, as well as a republic fragmented by political tensions.⁹⁶ Once again, Spiritualists' complex relationship with science is evident in their use of touch. They staked out a hostile position towards institutional science. At the same time, technological advances operated as important catalysts to the religious imagination. As discussed in the first chapter, Jeffrey Sconce and numerous other historians have observed the ways in which the telegraph opened up important imaginative possibilities for Spiritualists. "The *concept* of telegraphy made possible a fantastic splitting of mind and body in the cultural imagination."⁹⁷ Telegraphy abstracted the personality from the body— and by extension from the spatial and temporal limitations binding the body.

The personality as a disembodied, communicative, presence was tailored for the trance or channeling medium. These spirits manifested their presence through direct use of the medium's

⁹⁶ Cox, *Body and Soul*, 70-73.

⁹⁷ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 27.

body. This use ranged from gentle inspired speech to a complete bodily takeover. In contrast, material mediums were rarely displaced from their bodies. In the theology of Spiritualism, the material medium's presence simply created an atmosphere conducive to the arrival of embodied spirits. The vision of selfhood conjured by material mediumship was distinct from the abstract personality of the trance and channeling mediums. Rather, it was of the self as body, physical (though not always visible), and abstracted from all the implicit boundaries of space, time, death, and decay.

In examining the abstraction of the body, this chapter will pull heavily from Wolfgang Schivelbusch's work. Spiritualist discourse concerning trains reflected Schivelbusch's argument that the train radically transformed the way people thought about space, particularly in regard to distance, terrain, and bodies.⁹⁸ The train decontextualized bodily selves, and created a seemingly unbounded flow of bodies, coming together, pulling apart, while flattening the space in between destinations with the sameness of the train's static interior. The train paralleled the telegraph as a catalyst for reimagining the bounds around selfhood. Where the telegraph opened up the possibility of a self free from the limitations of the body (implying a self distinct from the body), the train opened up the possibility of a bodily self abstracted from material limitations, one that expressed itself and connected to others through and as a physical presence.

Spiritualists explained the physicality of the spirits by reference to electricity, odic force, or magnetism—all signifying a vague metaphysical solvent. Whatever the facilitating force, these spirits demonstrated the inseparability of the body from the self. As demonstrated by material phenomena, any individual, living or dead, had—as an inherent quality of being—a physicality, an ability to come up against and manipulate physical objects, and to take on a

⁹⁸ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

touchable, sometimes visible, human form. Granted, the spirits' bodies were more refined than the bodies of the earthbound. They often had a greater range of manipulation. Spirits tended to pass through or come against physical boundaries at will. And they occasionally manipulated items too numerous and disparately arranged for an earthbound body to do the same. At the same time, the spirits' ability to manifest was highly conditional. Edward Fowler's previously discussed spirit visitors were unable to precisely control the material in the room when any earthbound body came close to the door.⁹⁹ For the first two decades of the movement, having an audience was a significant barrier to materialization, and spirits were limited to their partial forms.¹⁰⁰ But the unbounded future frequently gestured at by Spiritualists ensured that this was a temporary condition. As humanity progressed towards a harmonious state, the boundary between earthbound and spirit would become increasingly porous, if not completely erased. The harmonious atmosphere cultivated in the séance room allowed for A to B transportation from the spirit realm. Following humanity's progression towards greater harmony, the carefully engineered and constrained channels of travel would logically expand until the body was truly free of limitations. Until "the freed soul shall hail with rapturous joy its transit to realms of perfect freedom, where it may roam over space illimitable, never seeking for heaven, but ever possessed of that harmonious development which shall constitute a Heaven within itself."¹⁰¹

Material mediums took the body as an inherent facet of selfhood. But more importantly, they utilized and interpreted the body as *the* site for expressing the self and establishing relations with others.¹⁰² As argued in the previous chapter, early Spiritualists worked to maintain a

⁹⁹ Fowler, "Edward Fowler's Communications," 450.

¹⁰⁰ Full manifestations were reported by individuals, but were absent from antebellum public séances.

¹⁰¹ H. R. W. "A Fragment," *Banner of Light* vol. 3 no. 15 (July 10, 1858): 7.

¹⁰² Even in the less bodily case of writing, the material object produced, and unique spatial arrangement of the letters (whether as handwriting or remote languages), were frequently responsible for the bulk of the writings' signifying power.

thinking, feeling, subjective selfhood in spite of a society that increasingly grounded selfhood in mechanical, physiological processes. Material mediums grounded the self in the body, but stripped the body of vulgar and determinative mechanics. Spiritualists worked to repair a fractured self and republic through emotionally grounded, harmonious, interpersonal connections. Keeping with this project, and in true Spiritualist fashion, material mediums re-appropriated the physiological model of the self. They manifested a self that was grounded in a body, but was validated by emotional social connections. And it was a self as a body whose physical presence was directly dependent on an environment of harmoniously attuned and related selves.

Earthbound Bodies and the Creation of Sympathetic Space

Prior to the manifestation of any otherworldly bodies, a Spiritualist had to confront a room of readily physical and present living others. The medium dictated the careful arrangement of these bodies—with or without direction from Spirits. Methods of arranging and facilitating contact between bodies both communicated and determined the relationships between the living bodies (selves) in the séance room. Though atypical of early material séances, I will refer back to Jonathan Koons' spirit room throughout this section. Koons anticipated the changes Spiritualism would undergo in order to accommodate the market. Examining typical 1850s material séances against Koons' Spirit Room has the added benefit of providing some initial insight into how capitalist logic may have reshaped Spiritualist logic in the decades following the civil war.

The first decade of material mediumship contextualizes the post war transformation of Spiritualism as a response to both audience desires and capitalist logic. The experience of sympathetic bodily communion was preserved in touch and full body materializations. But the active creation of sympathetic space and sympathetic selves through enactments of bodily

communion (discussed below) vanished in camp demonstrations. Spiritualist's progressive expectations suggest these developments as the result of a democratization of spiritual presence, fulfilling earlier predictions of a progressive bringing together of the earthly and the spiritual. At the same time, the bodies at camp demonstrations performed an arrangement and relation of bodies far more atomized than their antebellum counterparts.¹⁰³

Jonathan Koons' spirit room was an ambitious operation. His custom built log cabin featured benches running along the walls, accommodating over twenty visitors (many more than present in typical material séances). Importantly, these benches were distanced from the séance table, which was reserved for the Koons family.¹⁰⁴ The lack of intimacy between visitors and the medium caused by this distance prevented visitors from acting as sitters in any traditional sense of the term.

Material mediums often (though not always) had economic relationships with their sitters. But these relationships did not reflect Koons' model of spectator commercialism. They instead followed a practitioner-client relationship model. By this I mean a professional relationship between a provider of an implicitly moral service and a consumer—a relationship necessitating intimate interpersonal interaction, periodically over extended periods of time. Many Spiritualists were uncomfortable with the economic aspect of their religion, emphasizing instances where mediums performed “without money and without price.”¹⁰⁵ Some of the most famous mediums of the day facilitated this through “free circles” sponsored by periodicals or wealthy patrons.¹⁰⁶ With the obvious expectation of expanding readership, these free circles mediated and ultimately concealed the economic exchange between sitter and medium, lending a

¹⁰³ Atomizing because camp demonstrations did not create the same deliberate intimacy as séance circles.

¹⁰⁴ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 308-310. Podmore, 246-248.

¹⁰⁵ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 565.

¹⁰⁶ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 25. Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 149.

sense of both intimacy and religious legitimacy. Similarly, many professional mediums protected themselves from accusations of economic fraud by sporadically refusing payment.¹⁰⁷

Material Points of Connection

In early material séances, the table operated as the central sight of communion. Sympathetic energies were cultivated around—and often manifested through—the table. As argued in chapter one, the common practice of charging and balancing the table through a spatial arrangement of positive and negative personalities recoded established ideas about female passivity and male independence into an electrical register. For the purposes of balancing sitters, Spiritualists utilized a model of gender determined by temperament rather than biology. Importantly, determining the ideal spatial arrangement of bodies was the primary motivation for categorizing personalities by gender. Though gender was determined by emotional temperament, it was expressed as a presence or subtle energy emanating from the physical body. Proximity to other bodies could mitigate, enforce, or harmonize the subtle influence of the self—depending on the compatibility of the two temperaments.¹⁰⁸ The ideal physical placement of bodies around the séance table created an unbroken physical circle engineered to maximize emotional points of connection.

With sitters properly arranged by complementary temperaments, they were brought together through some physical means of connection. Holding hands was a particularly common and effective method. Overlapping feet under the table was sometimes added. In other instances all sitters simply placed their hands on the shared surface of the séance table, in full view and

¹⁰⁷ Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, 286.

¹⁰⁸ Davis, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse*, 98-99. Phoenix, “An Old Spiritualist—No 2,” 5. Uriah Clarke, *Plain Guide to Spiritualism*, 172. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 23-24.

mimicry of one another.¹⁰⁹ Spiritualists influenced by the promise of technology fashioned material points of connection from artifacts of electrical engineering, in some interpretation of Andrew Jackson Davis's suggested "magnetic cord."¹¹⁰ In any case, the arrival of a bodily and otherworldly other depended on first establishing physical points of connection with other earth bound bodies around the séance table—bodies spatially positioned for developing complementary emotional connections.

The form of séance circle described in this chapter was the consistent ideal form in antebellum Spiritualist print. Though frequently adhered to, mediums adapted their circles according to their needs. Rarely as dramatic as Koons' re-arrangement of sitters, professional mediums often disrupted the ideal of a hand in hand circle, isolating themselves from sitters or leaving one side of the table vacant, opening up space for manifestations.¹¹¹ But even in the extreme example of Koons' spirit room, the séance marked itself as such through the traditional markers of table, medium, sitter.

A visitor might easily witness Koons' hyperactive demonstration without forming any emotionally grounded impression of the man, distanced as the two would be by space and performance style. But for most material mediums, the séance was a site of intimate physical and emotional contact. Whereas Koons was able to summon spirits with only a horn, others required precise bodily and emotional arrangements—creating sympathetic spaces through bodily contact and harmonious subtle energies.

¹⁰⁹ Selected examples: John W. Edmonds, "Judge Edmonds on Spiritualism," *Spiritual Telegraph* vol. 2 no. 15 (August 13, 1853): 57. Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 137. N. A., "Excerpt from Boston Traveller," in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 191-192. Charles Cathcart, "Spiritual Telegraph, New York—Letter from Hon. Charles Cathcart" (Laporte, Indiana, February, 22, 1857), in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 339-340.

¹¹⁰ Davis, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse*, 98.

¹¹¹ Hammond, "Letter from the Rev. C. Hammond," 50. N. A. "Hartford, March 18, 1853," 106.

Before going any farther with the significance of this material point of connection, it is essential to take the attendant visual experience into account. Near darkness typified the visual experience of a séance. Chapter two demonstrated the particular ability of physical points of presence to instill certainty. The distrust of the eye or of the mind is a consistent problem for Spiritualists. Distrust of the eye demonstrated ongoing cultural repercussions from the enlightenment pre-occupation with optics. While distrust of the mind reflected the nineteenth-century model of a fragile subjective selfhood controlled by an unreliable physiology.

Sight and Self

Spiritualists—when they addressed lighting in séance accounts—tended towards succinct and vague descriptions of “partially” or “now darkened” rooms.¹¹² Almost all material mediums limited séances to the evening hours, and maintained some dim source of light whether a candle, fireplace, or lowered gas lamp. “During the darkness, all the phenomena were more intense.”¹¹³ Spirits required darkness. As Charles Cathcart advised readers of the *Spiritual Telegraph*: “All places and tables answer equally well, provided you have the mediums and can exclude the light.”¹¹⁴ At the same time, the dim lights of the séance room “gave sufficient light to reveal every form in the room and disclose the whole party with all their hands joined and spread out before them on the table.”¹¹⁵ Total darkness was rare. And in an attempt to exorcise readers’ doubts, authors frequently emphasized how well they were able to watch all present. “Every movement of every person could be distinctly watched; and I, at least, watched them very

¹¹² N. A., “‘Super-Mundane,’ With a Vengeance— ‘Medium Floated in the Air,’” first printed in New York *Dispatch*, in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 103. W. “To the Editor of the Boston Post,” in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 267.

¹¹³ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “A Statement of Facts” in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 184.

¹¹⁴ Cathcart, “Spiritual Telegraph, New York—Letter from Hon. Charles Cathcart,” 340.

¹¹⁵ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 251. See also: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “A Statement of Facts” in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 183. “Excerpt from *Hartford Times*,” 105.

closely.”¹¹⁶ Imprecise accounts of dim séance lighting evoke an environment of forms and shadows. One that preserved bodily forms and the nearby hands circling the table. The light sources reported by sitters (typically just one candle, fireplace, lantern), appropriately match the subjective descriptions of séance lighting. These low level light sources evoked dimly visible, poorly differentiated bodies around the séance table.

Partial sight deprivation in material séances was crucial for creating an experience of selfhood attuned for bodily connection. Séances were first and foremost social spaces. And sight in the nineteenth-century, more than any other sense, was imbued with an individualizing power. As Sally Promey argued, “Western privileging of the eye is a centuries-long biological habit and cultural position.”¹¹⁷ Senses carry cultural meaning and, in their isolation of one from another, are inscribed with specialized values and capacities.

Isaac Newton’s, John Locke’s and other enlightenment figures’ preoccupation with optics commenced an intellectual trend that definitively severed sight from self. Sight was isolated as a mechanical process.¹¹⁸ As Promey went on to explain:

Though John Locke trusted the senses as conduits of information, whereas Descartes was suspicious of their deceptions, both men classified the senses as natural, purely physical rather than cultural or spiritual, faculties. Theirs is the ‘scientific’ understanding of sensory perception most familiar today, with its privileging of sight as the ‘sense of science.’ Scientific understandings of vision and hearing focused early attention on devising technologies that enhanced and recorded sights and sounds. Perhaps not surprisingly, these technologies of replication facilitated the study of the two senses contemporary Western estimates gendered masculine and judged highest of the five.¹¹⁹

Scottish Common Sense Realism likewise maintained a definitive subject object split between the self and the external objects revealed through the senses. Art historian Alan Gowans captured

¹¹⁶ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “A Statement of Facts” in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 183.

¹¹⁷ Sally M. Promey, “Religion, Sensation, and Materiality: An Introduction,” in *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, edited by Sally M. Promey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 11.

¹¹⁸ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), esp. 38-60.

¹¹⁹ Promey, “Religion, Sensation, and Materiality,” 11.

the particular isolation and distancing of sight from the self in his characterization of the Victorian age. “‘The Victorian age’ as we use the term here does not refer to a chronological period . . . Rather it refers to that characteristic habit of mind permeating the whole period from the 1820s to the 1930s, which sees visual forms in terms of intellectual images, uses them as a kind of symbolic language.”¹²⁰ Vision was twice removed, first as object and second as a collection of distinct impressions tailored for a semiotic model of deductive reasoning. Under this schema, visual impressions necessarily reinforced isolating boundaries around the self. More so than any other sense, wholly subjective visual impressions were (and continue to be) a sign of a disordered mind. For sight to express anything more than external objects only strengthened the isolating bounds of the observer, stripping away his or her connection to the external world and consequently disrupting any sense of self formed in relation to that world. And in the nineteenth-century medical model, vision was at the mercy of a weak physiology. The unreliability of vision paired with the rigid subjective/objective dichotomy of observer/observed limited the possibilities for a sympathetic communion modeled around sight.

Despite the possibility of communicating moral truth, visual impressions were at a disadvantage. As argued by art historian Dana E. Katz, the proximity required for touch implies a social intimacy not found in vision.

Touch relies for perception not on localized receptors but on the sensitivities of the skin enwrapping the entire body. Tactile stimulation accentuates the material impulses of the flesh, heightening the bodily desire for physical contact with the outside world. In Machiavellian terms, the power to touch shaped human subjectivity. Sight might provide the discerning eye a view to the intention and integrity of a man, but, as the philosopher observes, it is only through the physically proximate connection to touch that one might truly know a man.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Alan Gowans, *Images of American Living: Four Centuries of Architecture and Furniture as Cultural Expression*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1964).

¹²¹ Dana E. Katz, “Sensing the City: Night in the Venetian Ghetto,” in *Sensational Religion*, 177.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the combined influence of Scottish Common Sense Realism and nineteenth-century medicalization led to a tripartite model of a physiologically grounded selfhood—consisting of intellect, will, and emotion.¹²² As argued by Thomas Reid in his *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, through intellect (deductive reasoning), the observer grasped “objects and all their relations.” However, “After these things are known, the understanding has no farther room to operate. Nothing remains but to feel, on our part, some sentiment of blame or approbation.”¹²³ The intellect organized and made sense of material circumstances, but was incapable of relating that information to relevant social circumstances. As the moral sense, emotion determined one’s proper placement in the web of social relations and responsibilities. As Reid went on to say, “There are therefore, moral relations which can have no existence but between moral agents and their voluntary actions.” “The ultimate ends of human actions can never be accounted for by reason; . . . but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind.”¹²⁴ According to Reid and others, emotions were not deduced. Rather, they were immediately perceived moral (social) truths. Any one of the senses might provoke an emotional impression wholly distinct from the accompanying Euclidean impressions bound for the intellect. But a history of intellectual scrutiny limited vision’s subjective significance. Though speaking in metaphors, the absence of “vision” in Reid’s articulation of moral sentiment was suggestive of larger limitations on the utility of sight. “As virtue is an end, and is desirable on its own account . . . there should be some sentiment which it

¹²² Corrigan, *Business of the Heart*, 295. Corrigan, “Habits from the Heart,” 194. Cox, *Body and Soul*, 24-25. Ahlstrom, “The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology.”

¹²³ Reid, *Active Powers of Man*, 485.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 488.

touches, some internal taste or feeling, or whatever you please to call it, which distinguishes moral good and evil.”¹²⁵

In the dim light, sitters’ visual horizons reportedly encompassed the other sitters, the medium, the table itself, and perhaps rough shadows marking out the corners of the room. The sitter was deprived of familiar material and locational markers. The particularity of the space was flattened by the lack of visual markers in the dark recesses surrounding the séance table. Euclidean assessment was hampered by the dynamic shapes and shadows that are inherent to flames. The visual appearance of indistinct bodies arranged around the table—connected by some common point or chain of physical connection—effectively deprived sight of the Euclidean information it had become so associated with and dependent on, as the “sense of science” presenting instead a visual field overwhelmingly dominated by a social arrangement.¹²⁶

Restricting vision worked to move Spiritualists away from the typical mode of interpreting sensory data in terms of observer and observed (i.e. in terms of subjectivity and objectivity). In order to establish points of sympathetic communion, Spiritualists had to break from the dominant observer/observed model of sensory input. They needed to manifest sensually expressed, emotionally grounded relationships—or points of connection—between subjectivities.

Creating Sympathetic Spaces

It took time to cultivate a suitable atmosphere for Spirit communication. Offering his own very successful method of bringing in physical spirits, Charles Cathcart wrote: “We sit around a table in the light, in the developing circle, as we call it, for about ten minutes, the left hand in contact with, and upon the next one’s right, and so on around the table. Remember, you must sit

¹²⁵ Reid, *Active Powers of Man*, 488-489

¹²⁶ Promey, “Religion, Sensation, and Materiality,” 11.

passive, and as near at peace with all the rest of mankind as possible.”¹²⁷ Ten to fifteen minutes was a typical waiting time for spirits, though their appearance was never a guarantee.¹²⁸ Joining hands in the dark, the sitters’ strongest points of sensation were the two hands, the two presences on either side. Hymns helped some pass the time and set the atmosphere.¹²⁹ Others simply waited for something to happen. Sitters and medium were visually limited to their fellow sitters, physically grasping one another, vocally and audibly sharing song, all with the aim of creating a physical space of emotional harmony. This preliminary portion of the séance was saturated with social sensations. The shared abstract energy that connected all life and made spirit communication possible was cultivated through a bodily enactment and experience of sympathetic harmony. The variations of placing hands on the table or holding a magnetic cord maintained a prescribed tactile point of shared material connection while replicating the felt and visible posture of candlelit bodies around the table.

The emotional connection embodied in a spirit’s touch was predicated on an episteme that took the body as the mechanism for expressing selfhood. Emotional temperaments were brought into contact and harmony—into sympathetic communion—through the physical arrangement of bodies. Darkness restricted vision, isolated and abstracted for so long from other senses as particularly external. Prescribed posturing and shared points of physical contact emphasized touch in its emotional communicative capacity. Though material mediums and trance mediums shared the project of expanding sympathetic communion, the spirit’s touch

¹²⁷ Cathcart, “Spiritual Telegraph, New York—Letter from Hon. Charles Cathcart,” 340.

¹²⁸ Selected examples: J. F. Whitney, “Personal Experiences of Mr. Whitney,” from *Spiritual Telegraph*, in Hardinge 243-244. Husted, “Buffalo, March 17, 1857,” from *Age of Progress* in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 287-288.

¹²⁹ Selected examples: Whipple, “Professor Whipple to the Banner of Light,” in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 265-266. Tallmadge, “Letter to Helen N. Whitman,” 475.

demonstrates a unique epistemic strategy that restored a non-biologically determined selfhood to the body—a body sustained by a life force and a logic of emotive presence.

As previously discussed, professional circles frequently implied some degree of economic and physical distancing. This inevitably diluted the sitter experience of sympathetic communion. Nevertheless, the logic of the spirit's bodily touch as an emotive point of communion survived—as Koons' spirit room demonstrates—despite the dilution or erasure of its preliminary enactment,.

Although Koons' spirits were attentive to the periphery of the room, visitors to Koons' spirit room were situated as séance observers rather than participants, with the séance table far out of reach and visitors arranged for capacity rather than harmony. Despite Koons' peculiar practices, the Spiritualist press treated his spirit room as novel rather than sectarian (in contrast to the press's treatment of John Murray Spear and his previously mentioned experiments). Nevertheless, Koons' spirit room resonated with Spiritualists for a reason. Visitors garnered many of the same benefits as traditional sitters.

Koons' spirits were pre-Adamic others of unimaginable wisdom and power. The spirits brought 1850s Dover, Ohio into direct communion with a mythic past that prefigured the earliest known site of fracture, the Garden of Eden. The formulation was novel, but it operated in much the same way as the more typical communion with the higher spheres. Spirits refined through the process of death usually found themselves in a world mirroring our own, but free from fracture and full of extended possibilities. Their touch gave sitters a social and emotional point of connection with an ideal alternative to the reality of their nineteenth-century limitations. The power of this touch comes through in accounts from Koons' visitors.

Nevertheless, the economic and physical positioning of Koons' spectators shaped their experience. The physical intimacy performed in a typical séance was diluted. Visitors had no active bodily or emotional participation in the creation of sympathetic space. And there was no tactile point of focus to accompany visual deprivation. Later camp demonstrations furthered this spectator model. Mediums appeared on stage before disordered masses. At the same time, these camp demonstrations emphasized the body through the heavy use of full materializations and touch. Though it is beyond the scope of this project to offer anything more than an initial context for the material mediumship practices that developed after the Civil War, the adoption of a revival inspired organization of bodies in place of a meticulously managed intimate social circle stands out as a critical point of difference.

Bodies in Flow

The appearance of so many bodies begs the question, how were they so easily transported from the spirit world? Though the network railways rapidly connecting the nation in the nineteenth-century did not achieve the same conceptual currency as the telegraph, it did radically alter the way nineteenth-century Americans thought about place and the movement of bodies. Just as the telegraph opened the imaginative possibility of a personality abstracted from the spatial and biological boundaries of the body, the train opened the imaginative possibility of a body abstracted from space and time (and associated biological boundaries). Though trains never paralleled the telegraph's stable symbolic power, Spiritualists wrote a lot about trains. They wrote about them as embodiments of progress and motive power. They wrote about the danger, the stillness, and the disorienting experience of train travel. And they ran mainstream stories on railway finances and the unveiling of new railway technology, while organizing Spiritualist

outings with published train itineraries. Though not always emphasized or imbued with metaphysical meaning, trains were ubiquitous.

As Schivelbusch argued, “the railroad opened up new spaces that were not as easily accessible before . . . it did so by destroying space, namely the space between points. . . . The railroad knows only points of departure and destination.”¹³⁰ Trains implied a new A to B model of bodily travel, emphasizing a departure point and an immediate destination—separated only by the static interior of a train car. The limitations of distance and terrain that were previously so central to the meaning of travel were erased. And by Schivelbusch’s estimate, travel time was reduced by two thirds—loosening, if not erasing, temporal limitations on travel. In any case, it was intensely disorienting. “The notion that the railroad annihilated space and time was not related to that expansion of space that resulted from the incorporations of new spaces into the transport network. What was experienced as being annihilated was the traditional space-time continuum which characterized the old transport technology.”¹³¹

One 1859 article on the economic advantages of moving from wooden to iron train cars reminded the *Spiritual Telegraph* readership that “there are twenty-eight thousand miles of American railroads now in operation, in which there is invested no less than \$1,050,000,000. These modern avenues of commerce have been incalculable benefit to our country. They have brought distant cities into close proximity, facilitated the means of communication, and have wonderfully developed our national resources.”¹³² The newly-developing space-time map was evident in the travel accounts and place descriptions in the Spiritualist press. Spiritualists located cities in rail terms. “Take, for example, a visit to a small town on the Chicago and Alton Railroad

¹³⁰ Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, 37-38.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³² N. A. “Railroad Cars—Dead Weights,” *Spiritual Telegraph* vol. 8 no. 4 (May 21, 1859), 47.

called, El Paso.”¹³³ Railroad connections, more than distance, determined proximity and influence between cities. Take Hardinge’s description of St. Louis: “the ganglionic heart which unites all the vast railway enterprises which connect the north-west at Chicago and the extreme south at New Orleans, St. Louis is a geographically-constituted capital, from whence tides of mental influence and popular impression must inevitably sweep along with the heavy freights of commercial power which constitute the wealth of this fine city.”¹³⁴ Trains, like telegraphs, were available as an abstract symbol of progress. But the train carried a literal power of progress unmatched in the telegraph. Railways brought cities into expanded networks of culture and commerce, creating a very rapid and concrete experience of progress. Railroads were transformative and potentially dangerous in their power. Defending the Fox’s credibility, Hardinge described “the little village of Hydesville, Wayne County, New York. The place, not being directly accessible from a railroad, was lonely and unmarked by those tokens of progress that the locomotive generally leaves in its track, hence it was the last spot where a scene of fraud and deception could find motive for or possibility of success.”¹³⁵

Though the telegraph certainly signified progress in the Spiritualist imagination, trains actually moved. They literally progressed through time and space. The metaphor was obvious. “The Law and the Gospel allied together, two great engines of power, shall be attached to his care of progress, and carry him over the celestial railroad into the gates of the Eternal City.”¹³⁶

¹³³ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 351. Further examples: Joseph Byron Lewis, “Harmonia, Michigan,” *Banner of Light* vol. 4 no. 13 (December 25, 1858) 7. Warren Chase, “A Voice From Michigan,” *Banner of Light* vol. 5 no. 12 (June 18, 1859), 7.

¹³⁴ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 353-354.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³⁶ Lizzie Doten, “Miss Lizzie Doten at Ordway Hall: Sunday October 2d,” *Banner of Light* vol. 6 no. 3 (October 15, 1859) 5. Selected examples of train as metaphor for progress: H., “Conversions to Catholicism,” *Spiritual Telegraph* vol. 6 no. 1 (April 18, 1857), 404. E., “Spare the Clergy,” *Spiritual Telegraph* vol. 1 no. 21 (September 25, 1852), 2. L. Maria Child, “Extracts from the Concluding Chapter of L. Maria Child’s ‘Progress of Religious Ideas,’” *Spiritual Telegraph* vol. 5 no. 16 (August 16, 1856): 121-123.

Some Spiritualists drew the explicit connection between the train's motive power and the medium's subtle energies. John Murray Spear believed his new motive power would surpass steam power. Reprinting a story from New York's *Path Finder* (itself reporting on a story from the French paper, *Courier du Nord*), the *Spiritual Telegraph* echoed the suggestion that the "motive-power" behind table tipping and other physical phenomena be applied to rail transportation. "The *Courier* calculates the magnetic force of twenty travelers will be sufficient to propel a train carrying two hundred passengers, and an equal weight of freight, at a rate of twenty miles the hour." South American spiritualists took the metaphor one step further:

The tables in more common use there, it appears, are round, and sustained on a central column and three legs. Around the circumference of the bed of one of these is arranged the alphabet, and along by the side of the line of letters a little railroad track, on which plays a car with a pointer. The preliminaries having been gone through, the circle formed, and the influence present, the medium lightly touches the car with his finger, when it starts on its course, running from one part of the table to another, and pointing out the letters, which are to be woven into words and sentences, and form a communication from the inhabitants of the invisible world.¹³⁷

Though most often engaged with in terms of motive power or progress, Spiritualists found a variety of metaphorical possibilities in the train. Discussing the confusion that led one Spiritualist to Catholicism, the *Spiritual Telegraph* reported:

Seated upon the comfortable cushion of his speculative philosophy, he looked out upon the world as a boy may be supposed to look from the window of a rail-road car, and seeing facts and principles as the boy sees fields and fences rushing past him with bewildering speed, concluded doubtless, with the boy aforesaid, that *they* were running away from *him*, instead of himself leaving *them*. Nature, however, does finally come to the rescue of both these blunders. Landing the boy at last, in the bosom of the family home, she kindly restores to him the consciousness that *he* has been travelling, and not the *fields* and *fences*.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ N. A. "Spiritualism in South America" from *Spiritual Telegraph*, in Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 471.

¹³⁸ H, "Conversions to Catholicism," *Spiritual Telegraph* vol. 6 no. 1 (April 18, 1857): 404-405.

Dr. Nichols error was taking the “Authority Express which leaves the city of childhood in the morning, is under contract (if it does not break down) to land its passengers all snug and comfortable in the bosom of the Catholic Church.” He should have found his motive-power “within himself.”¹³⁹

Mediums created destinations for spirits by cultivating a harmonious atmosphere around the séance table. The same subtle energy that some expected to power trains made it possible for bodily spirits to transport from the higher spheres to the séance room. It was an A to B model of travel, necessitating the careful social and physical maintenance of a space dedicated to spirit reception. Proximity to spirits—as strong or weak presences—hinged on the room’s collective sympathy (harmony). The distance between this world and the higher spheres was not one of time or space, but rather a distance measured in degrees of sympathetic harmony. Spiritualists collapsed the categories of physical and emotional distance into one simultaneous measure of social distance. Physical and emotional proximity directly implied one another, acting as two different perspectives on a single inseparable process. Spirit touch, letters, and music offered sensual, emotial catalysts for establishing communion with an other. At the same time, feeling a spirit’s presence in whatever guise, evidenced an emotional connection and compatibility between sitter and spirit (a successful creation of a sympathetic environment). Establishing a presence—closing the physical distance between the spirit and sitter—necessarily implied a sympathetic intimacy. A latent emotional compatibility pre-figured the possibility of presence. As such, touch did more than offer material contact with spectral others. Through bodily proximity touch implied an intimate emotional proximity; one that was properly expressed and felt through the body.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

Millennial Dreams

Though the details were always vague and inconsistent, Spiritualists frequently gestured at an imminent period of unbridled social and spiritual progress. Titles like *The New Era: Or Heaven Opened to Man*, *The Age of Progress*, and *The Herald of Progress* informed readers of their temporal placement. The spirit activity of the mid nineteenth-century signaled the beginning of a new era, in which “progress shall overthrow the walls of sect—remove lifeless forms—disturb the position of all false teachers, so that man can reach his brother man with no intervening walls and spirituality be preached and exemplified in the life of man.”¹⁴⁰ The boundaries between earth and the spirit realm would evaporate as humanity reached an unbridled state of harmony. The *New Era*’s printed excerpt from Rev. R. P. Wilson’s *Lectures on Spiritual Science* captures the wild optimism and non-specific characterizations of the coming age:

The germ of truth is imminent in man. As the block of marble needs only to be touched by the accomplished sculptor, to bring forth a likeness idealized by the artist, so human nature—unperverted by false teachings, and ignorant misdirection—when surrounded by true influences, will unfold its God-like powers, in harmony with the laws of existence. Formed in the Divine image, man would ever unfold in divine proportions, if celestial influences were permitted to permeate his spirit from the first inception of his being.¹⁴¹

Individual Spiritualists were free to innovate within this progressive millennialism. At times it took on an explicitly material focus. Some argued for a conservative “progress of matter from the mineral up through the vegetable to the animal kingdom, and on to the spiritual in man.”¹⁴²

Others went as far as to argue that “There is not an atom in the universe but will at some time become an immortal spirit. . . . Every spirit, whether dwelling in the highest heaven or the lowest hell, was once confined to gross matter, to materialism in its grossest form.”¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ E. B. Pratt, “Religion—The True and the False,” *New Era* vol. 2 no. 43 (August 23, 1854): 172.

¹⁴¹ Rev. R. P. Wilson, “Needs of Humanity: From Rev. R. P. Wilson’s ‘Lectures on Spiritual Science,’” *New Era* vol. 2 no. 43 (August 23, 1854): 169.

¹⁴² N. A., “Mrs. Henderson at the Melodeon,” *Banner of Light* vol. 3 no. 15 (July 10, 1858): 5.

¹⁴³ N. A., “What are the Immutable Decrees of God?,” *Banner of Light* vol. 8 no. 27 (October 27, 1860): 6.

The A to B model of travel was only possible through a carefully maintained social atmosphere. The movement of the spirit mirrored the distinct travel pattern (and experience) of trains, moving from one designated station to another. Spirits were incapable of appearing if the social space was unbalanced. Mirroring the train, spirit transportation required some preliminary structural groundwork, and was a fixed (offering no room for deviations) mode of travel between two places. The obvious extension in the Spiritualist millennial vision was a greater worldwide harmony that would make any location available as a sympathetic (and therefore possible and immediately available) destination. A harmonious selfhood would be free to “roam over space illimitable.”¹⁴⁴ The era of bodily freedom first hinted at by the train would come to full realization, and fixed networks of rails would be transcended by a new era of bodily freedom and connection.

Conclusion

The radical disruption of experiential space-time required new conceptual maps. These maps had to navigate the weakened boundaries around any particular space alongside the rapidly expanding horizon of places available to a body. The paradigm revolution triggered by the passenger train was above all disorienting. And it inevitably forced Americans to think about space in new ways. The Spiritualist method of recoding distance as a simultaneously physical and social marker demonstrated the expanded opportunities for making sense of space and movement in technologically mediated terms. The train—itsself an expression of the increasingly connected and harmonized social republic—removed travelers from the landscapes and distances between destinations. Travel became a navigation of social (as opposed to environmental) contexts. Add to this the typically social motivation for train travel, bringing particular bodies in

¹⁴⁴ H. R. W. “A Fragment,” 7.

and out of contact with one another (whether predicated on economic, habitual, or affectionate relationships). Equating emotional (or social) distance with physical distance—while emphasizing the train’s ability to compress space, bringing disparate locations into closer proximity—emerges as an intensely logical interpretation of bodies in transit, an interpretation of travel as bodies moving in and out of proximity to one another, expanding social contexts alongside an expanding geographic horizon.

Technological disorientation was an important catalyst for Spiritualists. Whether in the form of electricity, the telegraph, or the train, Spiritualists epitomized Gilles Deleuze’s argument that “technology is . . . social before it is technical.”¹⁴⁵ Expanding technological possibilities opened up new possibilities for social selfhoods. Material mediums enacted a vision of an emotive and sensual self, one that preserved and sacralized the body and its social possibilities.

¹⁴⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 40.

CONCLUSION

Historians have consistently characterized material manifestations as sensational novelties or as a degradation of the movement's philosophical aims. Without an analysis of sitter experience or séance form, material phenomena appears irrelevant to the larger spiritualist project of realizing a harmonious, sympathetically grounded society. But as sitter accounts make clear, material séances were about emotional connections. Spirits grounded social relations in some form of material presence, ideally touch.

The subtle energies cultivated in the séance room emanated from earthbound bodies. Spiritualists harmonized the personalities present in the séance room through bodily arrangements. Bodily proximity determined temperamental harmony, making distance a social as much as spatial dimension. In closing this distance, a spirit's touch offered a tangible other for sympathetic communion while expressing an already established emotional connection. A social (emotional) harmony between the spirit and the circle was the fundamental requisite for the spirit's arrival.

In preparing sitters for a spirit's touch, mediums orchestrated an all-encompassing social space, emphasizing the bodies around the séance table. Creating this social space may not have been a primary or deliberate motivation for dimming lights, holding hands, or singing hymns. But whatever the initial or professional motivations of the medium, the séance circle was a sensual, social environment that resonated with Spiritualists. It expressed a particular model of selfhood. One that combatted and repaired the increasingly popularized vision of self as a fragile physiology in control of a thinking feeling subjectivity. Whereas trance and channeling mediums challenged this disjointed model by liberating personality from its bodily confines, material mediums liberated a unified subjective and bodily self from the confines of time and space.

This re-imagining of bodies and their spatial possibilities coincided with a radical disruption of distance and the social boundaries imposed on spatially separated bodies. Rail technology demanded new conceptual maps to accommodate the increased spatial freedom of the individual and the opening channels of cultural influence between distant cities. Spiritualist reacted to this new reality through a model of distance as a social dimension, one that would eventually shed its limiting power.

Despite a healthy print culture, Spiritualism implied practice as much as ideology. Moving forward, the model of selfhood and the analysis of the material séance argued in this thesis offers an initial context for further analysis of Spiritualist practice. Having relied on normative published séance accounts, I hope that future work will test my argument against private unpublished accounts and against diverse regional forms of the material séance. Looking beyond the 1850s, I hope that this offers a context for the largely unexamined transformation of material mediumship after the Civil War, which preserved and even further emphasized the spirits' touch, while abandoning the managed, intimate séance circle for mass outdoor gatherings.

Spiritualists' millennial expectations reflected a rapidly changing nineteenth-century environment. New technologies opened previously unimaginable social possibilities, while institutional science and legal realities threatened the possibility of a subjectively grounded autonomous self. The political and epistemic tensions explicitly addressed by Spiritualists extended beyond their religious community. Changing technologies and highly contested models of selfhood shaped wider Victorian society. The sudden and rapid spread of Spiritualism in its early decades demonstrates a common sensitivity to these tensions, and the position that a changing society required a radically new system of thought.

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