Spectral Bodies of Evidence: The Body as Medium in American Spiritualism

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is an ethnography of the body as medium in the North American Spiritualist tradition. With its origins in the “burned-over district” of upstate New York, Spiritualism is a homegrown religious movement rooted in the radical Protestant milieu of “Great Awakenings,” which evolved into an international religious movement with a distinctly secular bent. Spiritualists, unlike Pentecostals and Evangelicals, de-emphasize faith or belief and understand the spirits as present to the “natural” senses and thus demonstrable as “evidences,” complicating the dialectics of faith and skepticism. Situated within North American “metaphysical” traditions, 19th century and contemporary Spiritualism foregrounds the centrality of mediumship and thus the spirit medium’s sensorium, through its practices of spirit communication. The medium is a figure of mediation, one who communicates the spectral presence of the dead—or as the Spiritualists’ say, “There are no dead!”—to the living.

This dissertation looks at how this emphasis on spiritual evidences draws out modern antinomies between secular and religious experience, and the certainty and doubt engendered by the medium’s attention to ephemeral affects,
sensations and images that define spirit presence. As such, it takes as its point of
departure the Spiritualist medium’s *discernment* of the spirit world as a practice
of making the body a *media*, or instrument, for the visual, auditory, and haptic
sensation of the spirits of the dead. Based upon over three years of ethnographic
fieldwork and archival research, this anthropological study was conducted in
Spiritualist Churches, home circles, training courses, and in mediumship centers
in New York City, upstate New York, New Jersey and London, including many
summers spent in the long-standing Spiritualist camp of Lily Dale, in
northwestern New York State.

As this dissertation proposes, a focus on bodily mediation allows us to
think the body not only as a specific *kind* of media in the common technological
sense, but as a sensory *instrument* for mediation in the originary ontological
sense, as religious mediation across thresholds—between people and spirits, the
living and the dead, God and creation, human and nonhuman forces. This work
argues that Spiritualism places secular and religious notions of experience
within an immanent frame, making visible the problem of a body affected—in
this case, by “clouds” of spirits—and, more fundamentally, the problem of the
body’s doubleness: as if always already shadowed by its own spectrality.

Mediumship, it argues, addresses itself to *a kind of evidence*, where what is
sought is *a kind of experience*: an experience in which the spirits become
discernible, and are figured into a verifiable state to become evidence for others.
By making the body the central instrument for mediating invisible forces of spirit, history, and affect, North American Spiritualism—it proposes—opens onto a set of problems connecting image, settlement and experience, laced together as a problem of the body. If mediumship concerns the fact of sensation, the fact of being-affected, affects are the foreground, not the background, against which everything else takes place: to speak of the experience of mediumship is to speak of attunements to overlooked images and affects and the way these are concretized into more enduring spirit figures. It is to this cloudy realm of fugitive images and affections that this work tries to attend.

Specifically, and in light of Spiritualisms’ focus upon spiritual experience as the unmediated ground of divine apprehension, this dissertation situates Spiritualism within a broader stream of Protestant iconoclasm, albeit at the margins, as a syncretic “metaphysical” movement of diverse spiritual and occult influences. This work suggests affinities between the Spiritualist medium’s mediation of spirit images, and a Puritan iconoclasm at the foundation of North American settler spirituality—where the displaced body of the settler becomes the central placeholder of religious experience and sacred image, the body itself figured as the sacred image or icon of God. Drawing upon these inheritances, Spiritualism is here situated within a spiritual geography of settlement. In particular, this concerns a geography connecting 19th century and present-day practices of spirit communication with spectral “Indians” and North American
settlement’s iconoclastic foundations: a history of violence haunted by spectralized others. This dissertation would be of interest to readers of religious/mystical experience, philosophy of religion, media theory, affect theory, settler colonialism, Native American studies, gender studies, and ethnographic writing.
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This work is mostly about affecting forces that press themselves upon us, often as pasts that are never past. To write, it seems to me, is to write from these forces, as much as the voices of others, of those we carry, animate, within us. To write is then to write with spirits, and this work is no different. Sometimes the spirits haunt or overwhelm, other times we find ‘our’ voice through them—the concrescence of a plurality become creation. To this plurality of voices, of friends who made this work possible, and seem all the more impossible to thank, I am indebted:

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The Daughters of Beulah follow sleepers in all their Dreams, Creating Spaces, lest they fall [...]  

—William Blake, *The Four Zoas.*
Introduction

The lights are turned off. A small candle is placed on a table in the center of the circle. A strange metal megaphone shaped instrument lies next to it. I wonder about it and then, as if reading my mind, someone asks the Medium what it is for. She answers vaguely: it used to be used for hearing the spirits—the spirits would sometimes speak directly through it! She makes an excited hopping movement to her chair. The room is dark and I begin to feel a bit sleepy.

She tells us the correct posture in which to sit. Upright, with your hands placed open, palms facing up, in your lap. It is harder to receive messages with clenched fists, she says, enigmatically. She leads us in a meditation. We close our eyes, and she describes a light that is first in the sky, and then moves down slowly to the ground and enters through the soles of our feet. It travels up through the “chakras” of the body, first into the limbs, through the pubis, the torso, the heart, and finally up to the “third-eye” of the lower forehead. The light hovers around the top of the head. Slowly she tells us to open our eyes. The séance has begun.

In the middle of this meditation invoking the spirits, I begin to have a strange sensation of heaviness in my legs and arms. I feel pinned down, locked in place, a small knot of fear begins to form in me. Then there is a strong sensation of something irresistible, a force pulling my body back and to the left. I feel myself caught between giving in to the sensation and struggling against it. This feeling is very real, and persists through much of the séance. Even upon opening my eyes I continue to feel as if my body were being pulled back and to the left.

It was the first time it happened, at this, my first séance. It was a paralysis of sorts that began in my legs and arms and travelled up my neck. I felt as if the only part of my body I
could move was my head, and even this took effort. I began to turn my head from side to side, to prove to myself that it was still possible... all the while the murmur of the Medium’s voice as she went around the “circle” giving messages to others. I cannot remember any of the messages she gave others that day; I was so distracted by the sense of paralysis that had suddenly come over me. Should I say something out loud to the Medium? Should I tell her what is happening? What if, I wondered in disbelief, it is the spirits pulling me? With these sensations in my body, the very idea of “the spirits” became suddenly palpable—a palpable uncertainty. But I did not ask for help. Torn between fear and wanting to somehow remain in this mysterious space of feeling, it was as if there was a force outside of me, pulling me, and I wanted to surrender to it. And, as anthropologist, I felt intensely curious as to whether she, the Medium, would somehow see or sense what was happening to me, and perhaps for that reason alone, I continued to remain silent about my condition. These were my thoughts ... and still I could not move.

When finally Carmen said, “May I come to you,” I nodded and with some effort—I could feel my voice traveling up through my throat and out of my mouth — “yes,” I said. “I see E.T.’s all around you—they are forming a wave around you, just behind you. I don’t know who they are but I see that they are forming a wave around you. Sometimes,” she explained in a more matter of fact voice, “sometimes they come in and we cannot identify them—and there are so many here! I feel that you are clearing a space for them, I see a man with a broom sweeping the floor like a janitor... you must make room for them! They are all around you — a wave of E.T.’s.

So I was struck by an amorphous wave of spirits...just a step off the beat of noisy Manhattan streets into an old Schwedenborgian Church at 35th and Lexington. I was struck by the strange affinity between what I felt during the séance—a bodily paralysis experienced
as a pulling force—and this having been named and recognized by another, as if the feeling were at once in me and outside of me. I was struck by the space the Medium’s message claimed inside me, a demand they made of me: to make room for the spirits. I was struck by the sense of bodies as permeated containers, full of invisible presences experienced and expressed as images—images that filled the room of the body. I was struck by this dream of ephemeral shapes: sensory forms of bodies, invisible yet visible, outside yet inside, and all around us. I was struck by a sense of being affected by something I could not “adequately” express. I was struck by the stranger-intimacy of the Medium as she spoke to me in forms she located in and around my body—E.T.’s all around, an amorphous wave of spirits—foreign words to me, designating ever more foreign presences, otherwise imperceptible beings as animate abstractions.

This dissertation investigates the Spiritualist medium’s discernment of the spirit world as a practice of making the body a media, or instrument, for the visual, auditory, and haptic sensation of spirits. It is also, more broadly, a study of the way affecting forces of the past become present to bodies as spirits, and thus concerns the sensory and affective experience of bodies more generally—those situated within the spectral inheritances of North American settlement. My study of mediumship is situated within the “metaphysical” tradition of North American Spiritualism of the 19th century in upstate New York, and in the radical Protestant milieu of “Great Awakenings.” Based upon over three years of ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, roughly between 2012-2015, my study of mediumship was conducted in Spiritualist Churches, home circles, training courses, and in mediumship centers in New York City, upstate
New York, New Jersey and London, including many summers spent in the long-standing Spiritualist camp, or village, of Lily Dale in western New York State.

Affective Encounters

A space of anthropology is opened, here, in the place of a body affected. Or rather, it is the becoming-Medium of the anthropologist, as she finds herself “caught” (Favret-Saada 2012) in a web of affecting sensations, words, and phantasmic images that bring her into intimacies, across distances, with unseen forces.

I offer this story as a way of foregrounding what is often elided in ethnographic writing: namely, the moments of being affected by who and what we encounter. An encounter that concerns how that which exceeds such neat boundaries designated “the social” or “cultural” gets into the body. This was Mauss’ problem, it seems to me, in calling for a study of the “techniques of the body,” and in making the far-reaching claim that even the most metaphysical of our practices—“mystical states”—are “at bottom […] techniques of the body” (Mauss 1973, 87).

And we might add, following Nietzsche, that philosophy has always concerned the body, or rather a “misunderstanding of the body,” for thought arises from the body, has its condition in the non-thought of the body (Deleuze, Guattari, 1994). Why, I wondered, is this moment of being affected so quickly elided? Why is this affective point of “contact” as sensory encounter seemingly swallowing-up by the copy, or idea, that abstracts it (Taussig 1993, 22)?

What began as an experience in the body soon became the locus of fieldwork, for how, I asked myself, do “spirits” become real entities for Mediums who sense them? And moreover, what do spirits have to do with those nascent sensations and affections that seem to signal, and figure, their presence to the Medium? It became clear only after my training in the techniques of
mediumship that the sensations to which the Medium opens herself to must be translated, or converted, into sturdier forms—figural abstractions—that, as such, can endure at least momentarily, as proofs for others.

And how could I begin to understand this, where understanding spirits begins with such sensations and affections, if I do not myself learn the “ways” of the Medium? This, of course, this is nothing out of the ordinary as far as anthropology is concerned. As in the famous example given by Levi-Strauss in “The Sorcerer and his Magic,” where the Kwakiutl Quesalid, informant to Boas and proto-anthropologist, endeavored to learn the ways of the shamans by becoming a shaman, albeit initially only “driven by curiosity about their tricks and by the desire to expose them” (Levi-Strauss 1987). It is, in any case, a now classic approach of participant-observation, though never without difficulties.

But, as I soon learned, becoming a Medium, studying the techniques whereby Mediums hone themselves as “instruments” of spirit sensations, proved far more difficult where participant-observation is concerned. As Favret-Saada points out, participant-observation names a seemingly paradoxical split of the self, between participant and observer, of “being outside while imagining oneself completely inside” (Favret-Saada 2012). This neat demarcation, however, can hide the schizoid difficulty of participation as such—of “being-affected,” as she calls it, or what is more, of actively lending one’s body to such states of affection as is required of the Medium. This, it seems to me, poses a real risk to ethnographic methods altogether. Thus giving herself over to being-affected, Favret-Saada describes the momentary suspension of her role as anthropologist, wherein she ceased “seeking to study what they were doing, nor even to understand and remember it.” The experience of allowing herself to be affected here approaches the limits of the “observer” in participant-observation.
In Spiritualist mediumship, however, the splitting involved in participant-observation is not unlike the splitting which occurs within the Medium herself, insofar as the Medium lends herself to being-affected by invisible presences, and learns, simultaneously, to become the instrument of her own sensorium. And it is this word instrument that Marcel Mauss himself uses to describe the body, as the primary medium through which partly unconscious social techniques—such as walking, swimming, and even mystical states are habituated. In this regard, conducting fieldwork in the space of mediumistic training involved inhabiting two different and overlapping ways of splitting the self, and thus posed a particular challenge for participant-observation. Not least because mediumship involves entering altered states in which one is both present and absent, active and passive, in which one is attending to an immediacy of sensations while at the same time communicating those sensations to another, and where those very communications are almost immediately forgotten—all this while bridging a seemingly ontological chasm between the communicable and the incommunicable, life and death. There is, no doubt, even in this description of mediumship, an analogy to the doubling of the self that takes place in the participant-observer, but perhaps the best way to describe the difficulty such an ethnographic study of mediumship poses, is to say that mediumship takes as its central focus the fact of sensation, the fact of being-affected. As such, affects are the foreground, not the background, against which everything else takes place: to speak of the experience of mediumship is to speak of attunements to overlooked images and affects and the way these are concretized into spirit figures, and in turn, made communicable to others. And it is to this cloudy realm of fugitive images and affections that this work tries to attend.

*The Dis-placed Place of the Body*
In practicing such bodily techniques, I was led down a path that opened onto a set of interconnected problems that may be threaded together as a *problem of the body*, or *bodily mediation*. For the kind of experience, honed and practiced by the Medium, far from settling experience as a form of knowledge, as something self-evident and common-place, rather, returns experience, and its claim upon us, to a problem of the body as *medium of experience*, and moreover, a problem of *trust* and *doubt* in the body.

It is not new to claim there is a latency in and of the body that makes the body an ambivalent presence, a latency revealed in the “attitudes of the body,” as in “its tiredness and waiting” (Deleuze 2001). This latency has to do with both time and space, both the sense of being out of the present yet in the present, as much as being in two spaces at once. As such, this latency of the body, its untimeliness, has been rendered most visible as either religious experience or pathology: as in the figure of the hysteric, the somnambulist, in traumatic returns, or in the ecstatic and mystical states belonging to the hazy realm of “religion.” I propose, however, that this latency is evident foremost as a relation the body has to itself *as an image*—what I call the spectrality of the body—and this spectrality calls into question the fundamental place-ability of the body. Thus, what I refer to as indexical *dis-placement of the body*—that the body is here and there, neither here nor there—lies in its being double, both phantasmic image and material entity, virtual and actual, and so, it would seem, is always already doubly displaced. The place of the body is called into doubt, first of all as a site of *experience*, in the experience a body has of itself.

This, first and foremost, points toward the aforementioned problem of the body: the body as a media/medium that dis-places itself, haunted by its own spectrality as much as its own sensations. The body is the primordially haunted media, and as Kittler says: “media always
already provide the appearance of spectres…” (Kittler 1999) If the body extends itself as image, for example, as captured in a photograph, it is as an image whose very reproducibility comes to stand over the body.1 Because a reproduction refers to a copy of the bodily ‘real’ it already hides within it a notion of the real as phantasmic—a copy of copies—or, spirits all the way down.

But what is the relationship of images as they emerge from bodies and return to bodies? Here, in the context of Spiritualist mediumship, what is mediated are spirit-figures come from the past, from the realm of death, to inhabit the present as living entities. There are no dead! the Spiritualists say. This makes the body itself a place caught within its own immanent displacement—its own spectrality. This dissertation seeks to call into question the self-evidence of the body as place-able, and this by attempting to make visible the spectrality of the body itself. If the body extends itself as figural-image into the world—like films given off by bodies— it also makes of itself, in the case of Mediumistic practices, an inner space wherein affecting and fugitive images of pasts re-present themselves as presences. Both Image and Space, the body can be figured elsewhere—it can emerge as a figural-image delocalized from the actual body. Or, the body can become an object or instrument of attunement to outside forces that then become inner intensive images. In either case, the practice of mediumship makes visible the body as both abstract and sensory, a form containing sensations, and a milieu of sensation giving rise to forms.

If the body has always been a medium, and, in fact, the most primordial medium, as I propose, the practice of mediumship puts the potentiality of bodily extension in relief by focusing on the centrality of experience.2 Experience in the context of mediumship raises a spectre of doubt in the body through the bodily sensorium regarding what one sees, hears or feels, and thus requiring careful training in “techniques” of discernment.

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1 This has perhaps been most obvious to media theorists in their concern with the seemingly inherent alienation of the body, as an effect of our mediatic extensions (Stiegler; Wegenstein; Kittler).
2 Wegenstein 2010, 33.
Furthermore, Mediums are themselves inheritors of a *modern* conception of religious experience and the tension it assigns between inner and outer experience. Drawing upon William James’ classic understanding of “religious experience,” I argue that such experiences appear to speak for themselves, authorize themselves—“I know that happened to me”—and this, beyond a shadow of doubt. Yet such experiences are fragile, as James shows, and often cannot be borne out in the world—made to endure—for they often lack an adequate discursive, social and symbolic space in which such experiences might be received. And it is here, in relation to the outer world, that doubt concerning the experience, enters in. But this is only part of the story of doubt when it comes to the problem of spiritual experience amongst the Spiritualist practitioners with whom I spent time—here, it seems to me, there is always a prior doubt that locates itself in the very fact of sensation, as these affects and percepts become objects of attention.

My focus on the centrality of bodily mediation in Spiritualist mediumship departs from readings of Spiritualism that understand spirit communication as merely a “cognitivist property of human minds.” Such readings of Spiritualist mediumship, however understandable, miss the mark, given the emphasis within the archive of Spiritualist writings upon a progressive spiritualization of the material world. While Spiritualism, especially in the 19th century, continuously emphasized the inevitable progress or sublation toward a dematerialized, spiritual world, this self-understanding seems to continuously bump-up against the centrality of the body as medium. Though Spiritualists’ often write and talk about spirit communication in terms of “intelligences” and “minds,” this is always problematized in mediumistic practice by the very matter of the body as the primordial medium of spirit communication. My work thus speaks, quite intentionally, of the *bodily* mediation of spirits. It seems to me that Spiritualism does not so

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3 Geoghegan, it should be noted, in his interesting treatment of Spiritualism as “abstract machine” communicating the “gaps” in 19th century infrastructure, also takes issue with this cognitivist formulation of Spiritualism (Geoghegan 2016, 922).
much concern the dematerialization or cognitivization of the embodied world as the spiritualization of the material world. These are not equivalent. In the blending of medium and spirit the body is extended, not de-limited or transcended. As Robert Cox has argued, the body in Spiritualism is envisioned as connected to other bodies, both material and etheric, along cosmic “chains of sympathy” and sensation, creating “a universe of the body and a body of the universe,” and establishing “a true social physiology” (Cox 2003, 90). If the centrality of bodily mediation has been largely been overlooked, especially as concerns the role of the body as instrument of sensation, this is in large part due to an absence of anthropological, and not only historical studies, but of studies of the “techniques of the body” of modern North American Spiritualist Mediums.

Problems and Images

This dissertation attends to four interconnected problematics, each adjoined to a thought-image—an image intended to lend a constellatory coherences to the disparate problem “clouds” as condensations of affecting images—as well as conceptual sections, threaded along, like beads on a string, within each part. They are: Part (1) Image—Transfiguration, (2) Settlement—Indian, (3) Body as Medium—House/Container, and (4) Experience—Clouds.

Part I opens with a scene of mediumistic transfiguration, whereby filmy “spirit” faces seem to emerge through the face of the Medium under trance, hovering upon the surface of the skin like a mask. This scene of transfiguration echoes the Biblical moment of Transfiguration, where Jesus appears to his disciples on a mountain, transformed to reveal his true nature in divinity as the image of God or “imago dei”—that is, an Icon. I place these scenes of transfiguration in relation
to one another as a way of making visible the ambiguous relation in Spiritualist mediumship between the body and image: Is the Medium an Icon, somehow analogous to the way Jesus, in the moment of transfiguration, becomes an icon of God? What does it mean for the body of the Medium to mediate spirit-images through her face, where what is mediated is not God, or the “One” true image of God, but the “many” profane images, as proliferating spirits that occupy the surface of her body like so many phantasms?

Here, I suggest, the body becomes visible as a site of emergence for the image, and this is the moment in which image and body become separable: captured in the way the spirit-faces hover before the face of the Medium, seeming to exist almost autonomously, and yet to have their condition in the mediating body. Mediumistic transfiguration also highlights the fact that spirits are often experienced as imagistic figures that dissolve the boundary between inner and outer experience. Of special concern in Part I is the question of such spirit images’ endurance—what precisely makes the image endure? Even here where the spirit-image extends from the face, it is the body, I argue, that acts as a container for the spirit-images, intensifying them inwardly while making them visible as proofs-for-others, on the body’s exterior. Presenting themselves as readily-recognizable images, these spirit-faces return us to the problem of the relation between sensory experience and form: how sensory and visionary experience becomes concretized into a durable, recognizable image. I explore this question around the endurance of images further, as an indissoluble relation to prior “events” of sensory and visionary experience, through other “physical” forms of mediumship: Trance, Precipitated Spirit Painting, and (Automatic) Spirit Drawing.

The latter half of Part I concerns the iconicity of the Medium’s body within what I refer to as the “iconoclastic inheritances” of modern North American Spiritualism. I thus situate
modern Spiritualism broadly, within a Protestant iconoclastic framing of the relation between body and image. While this may seem a novel approach to Spiritualism, in reaching back to Puritan colonial encounters to understand the present-day role of the body as medium, I propose there are correspondences within Anglo-American Spiritualism and Puritan iconoclastic understandings of the body as spectral SHAPE, particularly if Spiritualism is situated within the context of settler religion and spirituality. This particular spectral understanding of the body, arising from a Puritan iconoclasm, begins in the “New World” with Puritan fears of the Indian and the Witch as “demonic” spectralized figures. Taking up the work of Anne Kibbey, I consider how Puritans’ following Calvin, attributed iconicity to the body itself while banning outward images (Kibbey 1986). Thus the body was understood as spectrally doubled by an image of itself, a figura, or Shape. I argue the body becomes a problem to itself, insofar as it is here attributed a certain plasticity: the body can be either an icon of God, or fall into an “image of the devil.” This makes the body part of a spectral landscape, doubled always by its own image, which exceeds the actual or physical placement of the body. As such, the body for the Puritan becomes a special site of anxiety and doubt.

I will argue that the Medium, in making her body a space for fleeting and ephemeral spectres, inhabits this constellation of iconoclastic ideas about the body, particularly insofar as Spiritualism makes the image central to bodily experience, and attaches the image to the body first and foremost. Even when images are externalized, as in my example of Precipitated Painting, they originate in the spiritual experience the body has of itself, doubled by its own image/Shape, or as the Spiritualists say, an “ethereal body.” Finally, I consider the stakes around the life or death of images: how the fear around the animacy of images on the part of iconoclasts relates to the mediation of “animate” images on the part of the Medium, where to animate the
image means to return it to the body, to the experience of the body. Calvin warned that images are only safe when “dead”; that is, when sequestered to history—rendered “dead” through becoming historicized images. But what does this mean for the relationship between history and image? Are we deadening the image/spirit of others by continually historicizing them as objects of the past? The relation between history and image is considered both in relation to anthropology, insofar as it historicizes its object, and further, in relation to a Spiritualist conception of time. If, for the Medium, spirits are presences, the past is never past, and history is a matter of present experience—then how can such an animacy of images, and an otherwise seeming disinterest in preserving the past qua past, be reconciled to Spiritualists’ own claim to history in positing themselves as a “tradition”? I follow here Courtney Bender’s statement that “the puzzle of spirituality in America cannot be solved by locating it within a history it refuses” (2010, 184).

In **Part II**, I lay out my approach to Spiritualist mediumship within what I call *a spiritual geography of settlement*. My aim is to situate the emergence of American Spiritualism in the 19th century within the prehistory of Puritan settlement, not as an historical argument, but to think through a set of associations and correspondences that place Spiritualism within a particular nexus of spectral inheritances, figural, affective and conceptual, belonging to settler religious experience. This spiritual geography of foundation—a laying out of the spiritual logics of settlement—makes visible the presence of the spectre at the beginning. The spectre is revenant: it returns, but returns always at the beginning; thus every beginning is already a return (Derrida 1994).

Settlement’s clearings give rise to spectres. In North America, this spectre assumes
foremost in the shape of the “Indian.” Spiritualism, particularly in the 19th century, was very much occupied with the presence of spectral Indians at the séance table. Indians thus initially appeared in the role of healers, reconciling settlement’s past while acting as spiritual bridge for the Medium of the present. They also appear commonly as gatekeepers, as the first spirits to show up in a séance, who guide and protect the Medium in her communication with the dead from less desirable spirits. While it seems to me that the appearance of spirit Indians is less frequent today than what has been ascribed to Spiritualism in the past, my ethnography considers the general sense of proximity Mediums still feel to spirit Indians, even as they acknowledge their distance from the Indian. I locate a complicated play of distance and proximity in the Spiritualist’s contemporary relationship to the spirit Indian—one which cannot be thought apart from the colonial inheritances of settlement, as a repeated act of clearing, and thus of repression and displacement. At the same time, the modern settler, herself displaced, albeit in a very different sense—is always cut off from an autochthonous spirituality, as much as a relation to “nature.” Yet here, as Medium, she makes herself the medium of autochthonous “Indian” returns. Returns that seem to have as their aim the authentication of the Medium, while according the Indian spirit a special power as the “first Mediums” through which the white Medium must pass.

Today, even more than in the 19th century, the spirit Indian appears as an abstract figure without a history, made to stand in for their “race” and performed as a cliché: “the white man’s Indian” (Cox 2003, 191). I thus investigate the relation between the spectral Indian as unassimilable remnant of the pre-history of nation-making—assigned to a past that is in fact, never past, through a dialectic of memorialization and forgetting—and the Spiritualist narratives portraying more intimate returns of spirit Indians in the coming into being of the medium as Medium. If the Indian is sequestered to the childhood of the nation, only to return as “spectre”
haunting the nation, this role is echoed in Medium’s relation to the “Indian” as spectre of her childhood, within a modern narrative of spiritual supercession of the “primitive.” Forgetting and memorialization of the nation is knotted with the spectral returns of Indians, who, understood in a psychoanalytic vein as traumatic returns, concern not what is remembered but what, as “missed event,” was never converted to memory in the first place, that is, to the past (Lacan 1981). Perhaps the persistence of the spectral Indian reveals the spectre as an unassimilated remainder of settlements violence—and this, precisely because the violence is ongoing, unsettled and irredeemable. Settlement, I propose, thus suffers its own conversion disorder, its own inability to convert affects of the past to pasts, and thus to memory—which thus, as in the figure of the hysteric, bubble forth as spectral presences in and through bodies, and which takes on special meaning in the current U.S. political landscape.

**Part III** focuses upon the centrality of bodily mediation in Spiritualist mediumship. If the spirits were once located in the territory, that is, in the land, here, in the foundational story of Spiritualism, they move into the HOUSE. I begin with the story of the eventful hauntings in a rural house in Hydesville, New York, in 1848. It was here in this house at the margins of modern communication and infrastructure, that Spiritualists first locate “a battery for the working of the [spiritual] telegraph” (Britten 1999). It is also here that we find the first Medium of the Spiritualist movement in the figure of the young girl, Kate Fox and her sisters. These girls communicate with the murdered spirit haunting the house, and Kate invents a “code”—a simple binary code—involving audible taps or “raps” with the spirit.

I consider this inaugural scene of spirit communication as a transitional moment in the narrative of mediumship, insofar as it moves us from outside to inside, from a spiritual
geography of settlement’s spectres occupying the land cleared by settlement, to spirits, whether of “Indians” or more commonly, of kith and kin, following the body of the settler. The Medium thus not only becomes the intensive container, as delocalizable “house” of the spirits, for the spectral returns of North American settlement, but also the active “control” of such spirit mediation.

Important here is the moment the body becomes instrument. In this objectification of the body, the Medium makes of her own body an instrument for attuning and attending to these ephemeral sensations. Through honed techniques of bodily mediation involving the formation of codes formed with the dead, the Medium communicates with seemingly incommunicable forces, outside of life, yet within life. And here, in communicating the incommunicable, the Medium confronts an empirical excess that runs throughout mediumship as an “evidential” practice. How to prove that which exceeds empirical proofs? Proving the “continuity of life,” the Spiritualists’ stated aim, involves sensing presences that seem to exceed ordinary sense experience. Here I draw upon my own experience in learning the techniques of mediumship, to describe the ways in which the sensorium is re-made into an intensive container, and thus a medium, mediating the affective discernment of spirit presences. It is the problem of discernment in the practice of mediumship, and the emphasis on providing evidences of spirit presences that, I argue, together introduce a spectre of doubt into bodily experience.

**Part IV.** Clouds are condensations of images given off bodies, off the surfaces of bodies, congealed into ephemeral forms. The final Part opens with the problem of experience as concerning the alienation of the “securest among our possessions” (Benjamin 1969a), which comes to stand above or over the body, like a cloud detached from the body itself. How does
experience come to stand over the body as an abstraction from the body, no longer recognizable as such? How does such an alienation of experience relate to the experience of a body possessed by affecting forces that are “too much”? I here return momentarily to the figure of the hysteric, who makes appearances throughout the dissertation. In Freud and Breuer’s early case studies, the hysteric Anna O. coins the term “clouds” to describe her somnambulant states or condition-

seconde—a second-state entered by what I call the second-body, as that spectral body which extends itself sensorially from the actual, fleshly body. Inhabiting her clouds, the hysteric moves in and out of a waking somnambulism. Here what occurs in her “inner theater” (also coined by Anna O.) is not simply the impression of affecting images but images that present themselves like worlds—haptic image spaces one can enter into.

As I suggest, the problem of experience concerns the abstraction of these haptic worlds from the body itself, as abstractions that come to stand over the body. At the same time, experience concerns encounters that are too much, as in the case of hysteria, where what is felt and otherwise sensed cannot be converted into experience and thus remains lodged in the body—a stutter in the body. Mediumship, I aver, addresses itself to the problem of experience as this too muchness of affecting forces: both as something intensively felt yet not easily discerned, and as something that cannot easily find expression in the world, either symbolically or in a public. The Medium is here imagined standing before “clouds of witnesses,” as the Spiritualist Emma Hardinge Britten described it, in a world thronged with invisible spirit presences. As a way of controlling these aberrant affects, she makes herself a point of mediation, drawing the abstracted clouds near.

In considering the modern genealogy of religious experience, both within the history of Anglo-American Protestant religious enthusiasm, and as a philosophical and theological concept
of the 19th century, I am interested in how religious experience, as articulated by William James, confronts, and repeats a very modern binary between inner and outer experience. A binary, I argue, which is visible, and thus has shaped the way Mediums articulate their own spiritual experience. I trace the contours of “religious experience” through the oppositions of Protestant iconoclastic thought, and into the experience of becoming-Medium. Here I explore two narratives of “becoming-Medium,” both of which confront what may be called a “religious experience” as something that takes one out of the body and estranges one from the world. Here I locate a moment of doubt—a doubt that emerges through the very excess of affects that cannot easily be named or expressed, followed by the doubt, referred to in Part III, belonging to mediumistic technique, around the discernment of spirit presences as such.

Finally, I turn to a scene of anthropological doubt concerning the persistence of the spirits in the space of modern enlightenment. E.B. Tylor, as the historian of anthropology George Stocking recounts, visited a number of séances in London, mostly around November, 1872. These encounters with Spiritualist mediums in his own backyard, in some sense underwrite the story of Tylor’s concept of anachronistic “survivals,” of what he called “animist” thought, in the space of a civilized present. It is also a story of Tylor’s own encounter with spirits, as something he couldn’t quite shake and in which—at least for a telling moment—he felt himself becoming-Medium, or hysteric, or both, which makes him doubt his own sense-experience. The anthropologist appears here as one who is affected by forces that leave him in a state of ambivalence regarding the spirits, but also regarding his own affects. Tylor fears he is caught-up in his capacity to “simulate” affect, to trick, or rather deceive himself, regarding the veracity of his own experience. Doubt is here foregrounded and placed in relation both to the problem of experience as formulated in the dissertation, and to the relation between simulation/trickery and
belief. This story thus returns us to this other story within the larger story here, namely, the being-affected of the anthropologist: being gripped by something that is not easily resolved and whose contingency gives rise to ephemeral affecting forms—clouds—through which a problem begins to congeal.

All of which leaves us with the final image of the Medium as a figure of what I call an intense immobility, whose transformations occur as if “leaping in place,” to use Deleuze’s image, and thus seem to fold inward the spectres, as effects and affects, of settlement’s outward and onward movement with which we began. She counters this forward movement as the conquering and settling of space, with a leaping in place. The Medium, I contend, does not redeem anything or anyone, as much as makes visible in the body the past in a present modality, as experience—the insistence of a past-presentness, which has not been abstracted to Idea, or laid to rest as Memory. The many spectral images rise to the surface within her, with every leap they stick in the body, a leaping that allows them to endure, at least momentarily.
Part 1. The Face


Two columns of rows, as in church, but here instead of wooden pews there are metal collapsible chairs. Something impermanent, something *American* about this way of inhabiting space.

Pitching a tent or tabernacle in the desert. A carpeted area at the front, demarcated by a single step and small white pillar fence, confines the area of the would-be altar and houses the pulpit. There are two long vertical windows of stainless glass in a multitude of colors bracketing either side of the alter area. Three heavy Victorian looking chairs sit in a row at the front behind the pew, on the “stage.” There is a lot about this church that seems slightly off. From the outside, situated just across from the old hotel, the Assembly Hall looks like a regular white framed Congregationalist style meeting house—a porch in the front, double doors that allow the sun to shine in on the stained glass windows in the summer. But once you go in, the bare iconoclasm of many Protestant churches is absent—absent too are the icons of saints and the stations of the cross found in Catholic churches or Orthodox churches; here, rather, hang portraits, some photographed, some painted, of what seem like hundreds of Spiritualists, men and woman, gazing out at you from either side of the building. In the front corner of the room hang two oil paintings that immediately catch my eye; their emerald green, soft pink and grey tones emit rays into the room amidst the otherwise sepia colored photographs. The images are of famous mediums and early leaders of the Spiritualist movement: the iconography of a tradition.

It’s like summer camp. The smell of human intimacy in closed quarters—body odor and heat. As we enter the room we give a woman, seated behind a small table, our name and our money.
She writes down our names and puts the money in a little metal box, the kind that seem always on hand at church functions and elementary schools. We find a seat near the front and settle in. I am aware that most of the participants are women, between the ages of 20 and 70, though mostly fall somewhere in the middle, with the exception of a few men and, of course, William, the medium.

William introduces himself. A tall, thin, well dressed bald man with angular facial features and kind eyes. He looks very Anglo-Saxon—something Jonathan Edwards about his face. I could imagine him awakening hearts and minds behind a pulpit in the 1700s. His voice is gentle. He introduces himself with dexterity and stage humor. He begins telling us his story.

His dad was a military man, an “authoritarian type” and his mom “could make the house as germ free as NASA.” He tells us he is gay. It wasn’t until his 33rd year that he discovered his mediumship. William had worked since age 17 at a funeral home run by his father—at 33 he came home one day from work and saw three of his deceased grandparents just sitting there in the living room, in “plain light.” After this vision, “I immediately fell to the floor weeping.” How one came to be a medium, and the telling of this narrative of one’s initial experience with the spirits, is as much a part of what makes you a medium—making mediumship evidential to others—as the evidence of spirit communication itself. After this seeing, William told his longtime partner what happened, though he was afraid he would be thought “crazy.” To avoid this suspicion, William backs up his vision by telling his partner that he has also seen Rocco—his partner’s deceased uncle. William, though he had never met Rocco, described him perfectly. Since that initial experience of seeing spirits William has “developed” his mediumship, often sharing his experiences with both his mother and father, and credits his mediumship for making a “new relationship” to his parents possible.
This will be a demonstration in “physical mediumship,” he tells us. That is what we all signed up for—a rare occurrence in the past since physical mediumship has fallen out of fashion since the early 20th century. Such physical demonstrations are now making a comeback. Most of the courses at Lily Dale are in what is called mental mediumship, the giving of “messages” from the spirits to those living—and physical mediumship with its theatrical manifestations—ectoplasmic bodies, channeled voices and all matter of objects moving and rapping—is generally against the rules unless you are authorized by the Lily Dale Assembly. It’s due to “all the fraud these days”—nobody believes it anymore. The mediums here at the Dale tell me this used to not be the case—there was real physical mediumship back in the day—amazing things! Due to the fraudulent tricks of many Mediums, however, such demonstrations can’t risk further tainting the reputation of Spiritualism and alienating those who come seeking “evidence” of the “continuity of life.”

William pauses and says he will now begin the demonstration. Upon his request, the lights are turned off—the medium wants to make sure the red lights are working before he takes his seat onstage. Three red bulbed lamps, framing the front of the church, are turned on. While we are sitting there in near darkness, the mysterious hue of red lights framing the alter area with the three empty chairs, the lights suddenly flicker on, then off, then on again. Everyone turns to the back of the room to the door and a woman who is clearly in charge of lighting, says nervously “I didn’t do it”—someone yells, “it was the spirits!” …everyone laughs. William hands out sheets of paper with song lyrics. We say a prayer addressed to the “Infinite Spirit.” Someone pushes play on an old Sony boom box. We start singing to the Abba song, “I have a dream,” followed by an acapella rendition of “Michael row your boat ashore,” and finally “Sing, Sing a Song.” It all feels very light, campy, playful. We sing with Abba:
I believe in angels, something good in everything I see… I believe in angels when I know the time is right for me… I’ll cross the street. I have a dream, a fantasy to help me through reality […] pushing through the darkness, still another mile…

While we are singing the lights are suddenly turned out. All that remains is the aura from the red bulb illuminating William’s face as he sits in the middle of the three chairs. The light is fairly bright so it is easy to make out, not only William’s body, but also the two people sitting on either side of him. To his left sits an older gentleman with a white beard wearing a Hawaiian shirt, and on the right an elderly lady, her white haired pulled back in a tight bun. William explained that these two would assist him as he goes into trance.

Our volume increases as we sing, and sometimes we repeat the song two or three times. Meanwhile William sits upright in the heavy Victorian chair, his arms resting on the armrests, his eyes closed. Halfway into the first song his head drops to his chin and his jaw sags.

William had carefully avoided telling us what would happen during the class—though he did talk about trance and defined for us “physical” as opposed to “mental” mediumship. Although not knowing what to expect, as he began to sink into trance, his teacher interrupted the song to give us instructions to “say what we see,” even to shout out if we “recognize” anything.

The red light illuminates his face. His head still lowered. Suddenly he raises his head and faces us, his eyes remaining closed. Looking at his face something begins to shift, to change. At first it is almost imperceptible—as if there is a shadow in front of the face making it appear blurred. Dark hair emerges on his otherwise baldhead… like a dark halo, moving, shifting. The darkened areas do not appear to be in front of the face but directly on it, moving all around as if alive. Side-burns and a beard begin to form. People are getting excited. Someone yells out “He looks Native American,” or “I see an Indian!” The hair is animate, like an autonomous body, it
grows longer, and somehow his face appears increasingly angular. Others begin to chime in: I see an earring! His ears are growing! His ears are shrinking! He looks like a woman! He looks older!

There is some agreement—everyone seems to see the dark hair, the beard, the sideburns, even the earring (I see all of these myself, continuously rubbing my eyes in disbelief). What is astounding is the sense of animate movement, the snaking and shifting of features—the beard, the side burns, appear then disappear. Or, the face grows old, marked by a furrowed brow, lines and wrinkles. Then the face begins to shift again, the wrinkles fade and he looks younger. Another shift, and he is now a cross between a man and a woman. It reminds me of those Janus-faced puppets—if you roll the puppet between your hands fast, the faces change, blurring two faces into one composite.

His teacher, who sits to his left, shows genuine interest and listens intently to the rows of eager witnesses. He sometimes intervenes in the shouting to single someone out of the crowd, “what do you see?” I wonder if he can see the shifts, positioned as he is to the side of the medium. At one point, I see the faces emerging and changing distinctly—the “Indian” face again and again. At times I think the lips are moving and it seems as if his eyes are open. I blink, rub my eyes again and again, and even look away a few times to refresh my gaze. I could still see the faces. After a while, the movement dies down and William’s face is restored — though slightly distorted. The entire trance state lasted for about half an hour. Some people seemed very eager to identify someone—A president! Abe Lincoln! My brother! My Mother! An Indian! At moments the descriptions converged—when the shifts were most dramatic, we seemed all to be shouting the same characteristics. But as it went on, it was as if there were larger discrepancies around age, hair, gender, etc.
Of course this is a theater of suggestion. But suggestion has always been an acknowledged part of the scene of mediumship, with Spiritualism’s roots in Mesmer’s hypnotic passes. A Swiss investigator of psychic phenomena, Baron von Schrenck-Notzing, wrote extensively about the physical “materializations” issuing from the bodies of mediums he beheld in the darkened séance rooms of early 20th century Paris. The Baron believed ectoplasmic spirit forms were the product of what he called “memory images.” He located the genesis of such “inspirations” in “somnambular or subliminal consciousness,” as if the “memory images” of the “sitters” present during a séance suggest themselves to the subtle attention of the medium in her altered state (Schrenck-Notzing 2009, 482). To von Schrenck-Notzing, who explained the spirits in terms of psychic phenomena, the theater of mediumship seems to make visible a kind of inter-psychic memoire involontaire, first materialized as the fugitive images of some “mysterious intelligence” at work in/through the medium’s body. Spiritualist Mediums would draw upon such psychic and “natural” causalities—theories of animal magnetism, invisible fluids and electric currents or the more general references to invisible chains of energy and vibration passing between bodies—but for Spiritualists’ this was only ever half the story: the greater agency is of the spirits themselves.

During this episode of transfiguration, the Medium is not unaware of the power of suggestion and even notes this: William had carefully refrained from telling us what to expect, or that there would be faces at all for that matter, a gesture to remove the suspicion of suggestion from our minds. Of course any omission of suggestion has the desired effect of authenticating the phenomenon when it does occur, while setting a tone of mystery and expectation—and in a class called “transfiguration” one expects a visible transformation of some kind. Yet the setting is itself is so disarming—certainly nothing high-tech and stagey about it, just church ladies and metal chairs and a red light bulb. It all seems almost too straightforward, too demystified—but
for the awareness I carry afterward, a felt tension I can’t quite shake. It is in part it is a
doubleness that cuts through the experience of witnessing the event of William’s transfiguration:
a sense of certainty, that, even despite myself, I know what I saw, or rather, I know I saw
something (and it didn’t feel like a cheap trick), yet coupled to a spectre of doubt. Not only
because I know that this cacophony of faces seen are highly connected to the enthusiasm of the
crowd, having been encouraged to shout out what they see—though this alone doesn’t explain
much, if explanation is what we desire, for here, the power of suggestion itself partakes in the
mysteries of mesmeric hypnosis and somnambulism so deeply embedded in Spiritualism. There
is something else that drives this doubt. It is as if in the very event of seeing there inheres a
doubleness of indexical certainty—I saw that—coupled with a doubt—my eyes must be
deceiving me, for what the surface indicates cannot be the real cause. As if, by attending to one’s
sensations—the sensations of the surface—so deliberately, the body is estranged, and becomes a
source of doubt. This ambiguity around being affected by the strangeness of what I was seeing,
and the sensations around what I was seeing, was also, almost immediately after, accompanied
by a simultaneous sense of ordinariness, as if these shifting spectral shapes, by virtue of offering
themselves up as visible phenomena—in a performance—simply joined the ranks of all the
other, if not spectral, spectacular images, that daily inundate our present. I can only describe it as
at once superficial and mysterious. Here, the readily observable is also immediately estranged,
calling into question the certainty of the senses, not least of all because these flimsy and snaking
shapes appeared but somehow also felt animate, congealing into recognizable faces then, just as
quickly, dissolving into abstract moving forms, all of it emergent from the equally visible bodily
strain of the Medium.
Suddenly William lowers his head again and we are told to be quiet by the man in the Hawaiian shirt—he slowly raises his head and says he can’t feel his left hand or arm, only his right. He finally wakes up and appears very tired, blinking his eyes repeatedly, adjusting himself. The lights are kept out as the Medium returns to a conscious state. Someone in the audience asks if he could hear our voices. He answers that he heard us but could not make out what we were saying. He explains that his spirit guides was guiding him telling it was ok, as he fell into trance. He then explained to us that he has three guides: a doctor, a “Native American” and a man from the 1800’s. The witnesses informed him that they kept seeing an “Indian.” William did not seem at all surprised by this: “that was probably my guide.” All three are always making a protected space for him when he goes into trance — such guides in the context of trance are referred to as “controls.” They have the task of keeping out lesser spirits, and bringing in those spirits the Medium wishes to contact or channel. They “work” with him. But he does not necessarily see them, that is, individually. What did you feel while in trance? Someone asked. “There was a movement upward and toward my face and I could feel all the energy moving, swirling around my face,” William responded. He seemed exhausted and appeared very pale. He spoke very little afterward, and not in the humorous entertainer manner he had projected before his “transfiguration.”

Why those faces? I knew that the Spiritualists counted Abe Lincoln as one of there own—it was common knowledge amongst Spiritualists that he held séances at the White House led by his wife Mary Todd Lincoln, who was said to be “sensitive.” One woman was convinced she saw her grandmother. And then there was the lingering “Indian”—“I seen an Indian!” they had all shouted.
Making Images Endure

In allegory the observer is confronted with the *facis hippocratica* of history as a petrified primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death’s head.

— Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

What is known as the biblical ‘transfiguration’ scene is found in three of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. The scene begins with Jesus leading three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, “up a high mountain apart” where he is “transfigured before them” (Mt.17:1-2). In Luke’s account, there is the added note that Jesus went up on the mountain “to pray” and “as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered and his raiment became a dazzling white.” More poetically, the gospel of Matthew reads, “and he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments become white as light” (Mt.17:2).

Transfiguration names the moment in which the light of the eternal Spirit shines through finite face of the man Jesus, “like the sun,” in a whiteness beyond white, “white as light.” It is an unveiling of the divine face of God in and through the human face of Jesus. The unveiling of the face is simultaneously its dismantling—becoming pure light, heavenly light, the face *as face* recedes and becomes unrecognizable. The transfigured face shines differently, it is the effect of a temporal transition from an earthly to a heavenly light: “his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them” (Mark 9:3). This story might be the story of the *before and after* of the face itself, the face as recognizable index, to transcendent icon. After all, the transition named by the moment of transfiguration, with the disciples gathered round Jesus high up on that mountain, is of the human face of a man revealing itself as the icon of “his glory,” as Luke notes, *the glory of God*. And just as suddenly, as the passage reads, with this unveiling of the face, the body is multiplied, and standing alongside Jesus there are two
others: Moses and Elijah—the Lawgiver and the Prophet, both figures of the past, of the prehistory of God’s covenant with the Jews, returned from the dead.

What was veiled is unveiled, and in this unveiling of the face, we become-similar to the face of the One: “we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit [italics mine]” (2 Cor 3:18). The image of God is itself only approachable through the countenance of Jesus as mirror of God’s “glory”—a copy of the original. After the unveiling of God’s glory through Jesus’ face, the curtain is drawn again: “and a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud…”(Mk 9:7). Through the cloud, which darkens the light of the unveiled face, a voice announces: “This is my beloved Son, listen to him.” The vision of the transfigured face is darkened by the cloud and displaced by the voice, the transition from witnessing the face of the divine, to hearing the Word. And with this all specters disappear: “and they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.”

Jesus — now “only” Jesus — upon coming down the mountain “charged them to tell no one what they had seen,” this until the resurrection “of the Son of Man,” from the dead. While the final revelation (of Christ) always comes later, endlessly deferred, it is always punctuated in the meantime by further revelations and further concealments, like the cloud descending ever again to shroud the holiness. Veering between mask and a window, the face both conceals the inner image of God, and, at the same time, acts as a reflective glass through which we might behold the “true” divine image; as Taussig puts it, “together they make an orgy of disproportion compounded by the fact that the face never exists alone; fated in its very being to be only when faced by another face” (Taussig 1999, 224-225).
The emergent spirit “mask” is the defacement of the earthly face. The earthly face is emptied and filled by a light “whiter than white” and so becomes the icon of the divinity, the imago dei or the chosen mask par excellence, behind which God hides and reveals Godself. But the transfigured face alone cannot hold the “glory of God”—the vision does not endure in the mirror but fades, and Jesus comes down from the mountain darkened under cloud-cover, deferring the space of revelation until the time of his bodily resurrection from death. It is as if the face alone cannot make the image endure—the body is needed to hold the contradiction in time, between revelation and concealment.

All of this takes place before the unwitting witnesses, Peter, James and John, who stand before these spiritual specters “heavy with sleep,” but “kept awake” by this vision of “his Christ’s glory” (Luke 9:32). In all three accounts Peter makes the strange proposal: “Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths [also translated tents, or tabernacles] one for you, and one for Moses and one for Elijah” (Mk 9:6). Seeing specters, Peter “did no know what else to say for they were exceedingly afraid” (Mk 9:6). And just as he made his offer to house the specters, the shapes of Moses and Elijah suddenly disappear, and only Jesus was left. But what of the strangeness of Peter’s offer to build “booths” for the spectres? To honor the vision of specters, here means to build the specter a house, a container, so that they might remain a little longer. To witness means to make room for the revelation—to welcome the spirits in—to build a tent, a house, a second-container, to hold onto what is seen and felt.

Peter’s desire to build “booths” has been interpreted as a recognition that the heavenly “kingdom” can now be built on earth. It is, I would say, quite literally, the attempt to make this
spectral vision endure — to make the vision last beyond the moment of witnessing. If a second-container is needed to hold the “vision,” I want to say, it is because the face alone is not enough. The face needs a body. The Protestant theologian Stanley Hauerwas interprets this moment to be Peter’s misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus’ body. Peter does not see that it is Jesus’ body that is already the “booth” that houses the spirit; his “flesh is the booth of God’s presence.” As such, the “wild spirit of God’s kingdom,” connecting heaven and hearth, is housed in the body of Christ incarnate (Hauerwas 2006, 156-157). The face shines as bright as the sun, but the body is a container for the light—that “wild spirit of God’s kingdom”—which displaces the need for a shrine, “tent” or “booth,” to house the spirit. All that is needed is the flesh. But the flesh transformed into a container that houses the divine image within. The body, not the face, is the final “booth,” the site of Jesus’ transfiguration—according here to Hauerwas—as the incarnate and resurrected body, which, I would add, is a body that can hold the image of (everlasting) life, the imago dei, because it is a body that has passed through death, and thus resurrected must contain the image of death within it. In this regard, the body, unlike the face, does not belong to the present, but carries life and death, the “before and after,” past and future, in it (Deleuze 1989). But even if we turn from the holy body, the resurrected body, to the mundane body, we find the body is not of the present. It is in the attitudes of the body, says Deleuze, their “tiredness and waiting,” that time expresses itself—“time in the body” (Deleuze 1989). The body is both displaced temporally and physically—it does not belong to the present, nor is it reducible in this sense, to the flesh—the flesh is too weak—for what a body senses points to forces beyond itself.

4 With the term “endurance,” I am broadly and implicitly inspired by the problematic Povinelli poses in “The Will to be Otherwise/Efforts of Endurance,” exploring the endurance of fragile states of potentiality, or “efforts to be otherwise” (Povinelli 2012).

5 Hauerwas argues that Peter’s misunderstanding of who Jesus is, himself the “booth” also means he fails to understand that Moses and Elijah now worship Jesus,” which establishes Jesus in line with the tradition of the Law and Prophets but also as the fulfillment of God’s covenant.
This is especially the case when what displaces the body are the affects and sensations communicated by spirits—themselves from another time and place. Mediumship, I want to say, uniquely manifests this displaced power of the body—not only that it does not belong to the present, but that it acts as a house or container of sensations that mediate an elsewhere, as much as an other time. What is needed is a house, for it is the house as “differently oriented planes […] which give sensation the power to stand on its own within autonomous frames,” or, here as I have called it, a container (Deleuze, Guattari 1994, 179). Deleuze and Guattari were referring to the exteriority of affects and percepts; not merely expressions of phenomenological experience, “the flesh,” but autonomous “beings” in themselves, their existence exceeding the conditions in which they arise, whether of subjective feeling or objective “states of affairs” (1994). Strictly speaking, affects are not emotions, as emotion is a notion that ties itself to the subject of emotion. Every subject has a certain capacity to be affected by forces outside themselves—there are different capacities for affection. The author is thus in the art, to be sure, but not in such a way that art simply refers back to the subject of feeling and expression. Art is, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the making of monuments of sensation—making the sensations “stand up on their own” in some material medium, yet able to endure beyond the subjects who initially experience them, or even the materials that hold them (1994, 163-164). The autonomy of percepts and affects, and thus their ability to travel across registers, is apparent in art, where displaced affects and percepts are found expressed in a medium other than in the subject who feels and sees (1994, 163-164). And yet the material in which such sensations—as forces acting upon us and through us—are expressed, is not accidental; the materialization of an affect is itself an “event” of sensation, by which I mean, the material and virtual moment in which a difference is actualized (Deleuze 1990).
In these disparate scenes of transfiguration, of Jesus’s face as the window of the One true face of God (*imago dei*), and of the Medium making the “many” spectral spirit faces appear, we find an emptying-out of the subjective face, and the filling-in of an image that comes as if from the outside. But what makes the image endure? It is the body, not the face, I want to say, that makes room for the image—it is the body, like a monument or a house unto itself that holds the revelation.

If William’s transfiguration contains the image, makes it endure—what are these images, images of? Here, the body is not filled with the image of the One, the holy, but with the *many*—a multiplicity of faces drawn from the profane realm of life, faces, moreover, that seem to promise nothing. Rather, if they proclaim anything, it is *their presence as our experience*, here and now, proofs as the Spiritualists say, that “the dead are not dead,” the past is not past.

My reading of the biblical passage is simply an attempt to draw out a problem present already in the Christian transfiguration of the face into icon of God’s glory, namely, how to make the image endure. This problem seems to point to a problem with images as such—namely, that images are ephemeral and need a quasi-body as container. It is this containment of the image in the body itself as “booth” or mobile “tent”—the becoming icon of the image—that we find the grounds, paradoxically, for thinking a delocalizable spirit that now, freed from the Law (Moses and Elijah disappear) but also from place (Jerusalem), sets out to universalize the “good news” of Christianity. In modern Spiritualism, with its Protestant roots, this problem persists it seems to me—the problem of how to make spirits, as living images of the dead, endure in and through the body of the Medium so that they might be witnessed and made *evidential* to a public. The delocalization of the spirit as it searches for a mobile body—as it becomes housed in the body of the Medium, however momentarily—likewise marks the possibility of a universalization of the
“spirits.” For the many spirits are now deterritorialized from tradition and place and reterritorialized upon the body of the Medium. These “modern” spirits of 19th century Spiritualism, once localized by place and tradition are deterritorialized and free to “show up,” in and through the ever displaced (and displacing) body of the North American settler. As we will see in the Spiritualist tradition of modern mediumship the spirits follow the body of the Medium. The body of the Medium becomes a “booth” for the spirits of “old” Europe, of ties to kith and kin, but more so, to the displaced and genocided spirits of the “New World”—especially the site of spectral returns of the now colonized body of the “Indian” that haunts settlement (which I will address in Part 2).

A Spiritualist writer and psychic investigator, Maurice Barbanell, discussing “transfiguration” amongst mediums, the term itself referring back to the Biblical transfiguration, claimed that such Biblical visions and apparitional appearances are to be read as testaments to the work and power of mediumship (Barbanell 1959). He is keeping here with a long tradition of Spiritualist redactors who read the bible through the lens of, and as testament to, embodied mediumistic experience. In a defensive conclusion, Barbenell adds: “the séance provides the perfect answer to those who assert that psychic phenomena are condemned by the Bible” (Barbanell 1959:190). A charge that Spiritualist’s, as a movement emergent from the edges of an enthusiastic and millennial Protestantism, and the larger milieu of modern Christianity (however secularized) have been particularly sensitive to, and due to which numerous writings exist drawing parallels between mediumistic practices and those miracles and visions occurring in the Bible. Such apologetics also emerge within the movement of Spiritualist mediumship, as the need to reconcile the Protestant milieu in which Spiritualism emerges with the practice of communication with the dead, commonly read as forbidden in the Bible. Barbanell cites
visionary experiences in the Bible, such as the conversion of Saul (later Paul), who is thrown from his horse in a moment of blinding vision, as evidence of “psychic” phenomena experienced by the apostle (1959, 189). “Christianity owes its existence to psychic phenomena that are similar to present-day séance-room happenings” (1959, 189).

Similarly, a medium and head teacher at the Arthur Findlay School for mediumship in Stansted, England, reiterated this understanding of Biblical revelation to me: “the Bible is full of Spiritualist phenomena,” in which he included “Moses’ speaking to God in a cloud, the day of Pentecost, and the materialization of Christ to his disciples.” He went on to explain Spiritualism in its emergence was “Christianity with messages,” and was seen “as affirming the Bible,” rather than “contradicting the Bible.” “Really it [Spiritualism] became a religion by default, modeled on the Methodist service…even using the Methodist hymnbook but changing the words” for example: “our Savior God” was changed to “our Father God,” to reflect the fact that Spiritualists did not believe in salvation. For Spiritualists’ there is no fall into original or “inherited” sin, and Jesus not the Son of God but a medium important for his moral teachings.

It is not faith in the biblical revelation that, for Barbanell, is the ground of his belief in the “miracles” of Jesus but one’s own lived experience of witnessing such phenomena in the séance-room. It is experience, not faith, in spirits that gives him “a reason for accepting the Biblical ‘miracles’, which have caused thousands to turn their backs on supernatural religion” (Barbanell 1959, 188). And this is a common distinction among Spiritualists—it is not faith that grounds their belief in spirits, but “evidence”—not faith seeking understanding, as Saint Anselm once said, but evidence seeking faith. Thus Barbanell insists: “It was evidence, not faith, proof, not hope, that transformed the disciples into apostles burning with zeal to spread the new gospel” (1959, 188). Overturning the passage in the Hebrew bible, where “faith” is the “evidence of
things not seen,” (Hebrews 11:1) the Spiritualists, like a modern doubting Thomas, demand evidences of things seen and otherwise sensed before believing. “Psychic” and experiential “evidence” is here the ground of faith and not the other way around. Jesus’ resurrection is thus formulated in terms of his giving “proof” of the continuity of life, which, by extension, is what Spiritualism aims to prove in giving “demonstrations” of spirit communication or manifestation.

Comparing the transfiguration of Christ to that occurring in the Spiritualist séance, Barbanell likens the divine light shining through the face of Jesus to the formation of ectoplasm in mediumistic “transfiguration”—a cloudy mask-like substance that forms in front of the medium’s face. In referring to the transformation of the Medium’s face as “transfiguration,” the Spiritualist is already reading mediumship through the Biblical transfiguration. However, in keeping with a scientific tone typical of 19th century Spiritualists who represent mediumship as a “science” of spiritual experimentation, Barbanell insists that the scene on the Mount of Transfiguration created the “ideal conditions,” notably the “pure air and stillness” for “psychic manifestations.” He even refers to the gathering of Jesus, Peter, James and John as a “séance” (1959, 189). The “garments as white as light,” are a “perfect description” of the cloud-like substance of ectoplasm that issues from the Medium’s body and becomes the raw material that forms faces, sometimes full bodily apparitions of the spirits (1959, 190). Reading Luke’s account, Barbanell notes that Jesus’ transfiguration by which “his countenance was altered and his raiment was white and glistening,” is not, in the séance rooms of his time, “an uncommon psychic phenomenon.”: “I have frequently seen a medium’s face become transfigured, by the ectoplasm built over it, until the features of the deceased persons are clearly recognizable” (1959, 189). Further drawing a parallel to the “booths” or “tents” which Peter offers to build for the spirit manifestations, Barbanell notes the use in Spiritualism of a cabinet: an enclosure usually
loosely constructed, often a black tent with four posts holding up dark fabric, with a chair in the center for the Medium. In a telling phrase, Barbanell interprets Peter’s desire to build the “booths” or here, mediumistic cabinets, as arising “out of a desire to make the image last longer… to intensify the energy” (1959, 189). The cabinet, by enclosing the energy that radiates through the Medium’s body, is said to intensify the build up of such energy, which then might be exuded as ectoplasm.

Intensification through containment, the cabinet like the body itself, provides that minimal enclosure for sensation to condense, and finally exude, as an independent cloud-like form. Keeping spirits in a “closet” so to speak, as Barbanell’s reading of Peter’s offer to Jesus implies, partakes in Spiritualist understandings of how the spiritual body might be intensified and extended through the actual body of the Medium. This occurs in three ways: first through the mediation of the Medium’s actual body, as the substance from which ectoplasm is made; second, insofar as the actual body acts as porous container for the spirits; and third by the enclosure of the cabinet itself, a kind of temporary house for the energetic intensification of this spirit-matter, which is exuded as “materializations” during a séance in the form ectoplasmic faces, hands, heads and sometimes full figured apparitions. The cabinet, in other words, like Peter’s tents, “makes them stay longer.”

What interest me, in both Christian and Spiritualist understandings, is the idea of the body as a container that intensifies and holds the “wild spirit” of God, or, in the context of mediumship, the energies of the many “spirits.” And, furthermore through the figure of the Medium, the ontological relation designated here between body and image: the spirit, as image, manifest in and through the fleshly body of the Medium, which is understood as a sensual vehicle for making the image endure beyond the moment of revelation. What I draw from
Barbanell’s reading of Peter’s offer to build booths, is that Spiritualists’ sought the intensification and extension of spirit manifestations, of what is fleetingly seen and sensed by the Medium, into forms with greater endurance, forms capable of acting as demonstrable “proofs” for others.

This understanding of the need to make the image/spirit endure through a container—the icon, the booth etc.,—draws out what I’m circling around, namely, the iconicity of the body itself as plastic and mobile container. For Spiritualists these flimsy filmy manifestations—the effects of sensory and affective attention to the spirit world—make the body the site of ephemeral proofs, intensified and contained, first by the body of the medium, and second by the “cabinet.” Even in the absence of cabinets used for channeling spirits and effecting “physical manifestations,” I want to say, the body as Medium acts a primordial site of mediation, and thus the first container of the spirits. The séance, by extension, makes transmissible the practice of mediumship—as does that smaller circle, the triad between medium, sitter and spirit—constituting a form capable of intensifying spirit energies: what more archaic shape of enclosure, of infinity biting its own tail, than a circle!

It is no wonder that Spiritualism turned to photography, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to make “the image last longer,” capturing the filmy spirit in an equally filmy layer of celluloid in order to secure its place as “evidence.” The term “development” is often used to describe the path of the Medium to the full realization of his/her powers of spiritual “attunement.” The medium is “developed” in her cabinet, just as film is developed in the enclosure of the dark room. Interestingly, as in the roughly coeval conventions employed in Charcot’s Salpêtrière archive of 19th century photographs of hysterical poses caught in the light of the paralyzing “flash” in an otherwise enveloping darkness, the photographs of ectoplasmic
materializations often show the figure of the Medium thrown against a black background (the curtain or cabinet) which has the strange effect of making the body appear in an empty space that “engulfs and absorbs” the viewer (Baer 2002:18). Ulrich Baer points out that the photographic convention of a figure against a black background, first employed by Charcot reflects Charcot’s theorization of trauma “as an aberration of memory that leaves a body without context.”

Similarly, spirit photography, in its use of decontextualized space, makes visible, to my mind, the return of the spirits, now delocalized, through the body of the Medium—and moreso, seems to make visible the separation of the figure from the body, the abstraction from the flesh.

![Figure 1 Ectoplasm on the Medium Eva C., Paris, 1912 (Notzing, 2009)](image)

The body thus appears in a delocalizable space—an “any-space-whatsoever” (Deleuze 1989)—which reflects, I want to say, both the modernity of mediumship, as locating itself within the history of the displaced modern body, and body of the Medium, as one displaced by spectres always already superimposed on the flesh.

In the case of “physical” proofs, more popular during the 19th century in the context of what is now distinguished as “physical mediumship”—which includes ectoplasmic
materializations (wherein a spirit will materialize in the room during a séance, in a fluid ectoplasmic body), table tipping, direct voice phenomena (where the medium’s vocal chords are borrowed by the spirit she channels in trance), transfiguration and so on—is a direct extension of the Medium’s own energetic body or “etheric” body, what I call her second-body. It is this second-body of sensation that doubles the fleshly body of the Medium, and is somehow harnessed by the spirits in the making of an ectoplasmic visible “spirit” body. As one medium put it to me, “spirit uses ectoplasm to clothe themselves so we can see them with our physical sight.” Or, to quote Arthur Findlay, “one of modern Spiritualism’s most esteemed writers” writing in 1931, who said: “those we call dead live on as men and women in a duplicate etheric body, and are able to manifest their presence again within this material world of ours, by borrowing from the medium a certain excretion, which emanates from his body” (2000, 12). In this sense, the Medium’s body, her actual body, lends itself to the spirits, both materially and sensorially, so that the immaterial spirit, as intensive body, might be externalized as a material body of spiritual “proof.”

In tracing the antinomies of “fits, trances and visions,” of what has been subsumed under the general category of “religious experience” within an Anglo-American tradition, Ann Taves points out that Spiritualists’ understood “trance” states “as a common or universal doorway to the other world,” providing a “seemingly” empirical basis, “grounded in psychology rather than theology,” for “talking about religious experience” (Taves 1999, 167). Such states provided a “new basis for interpreting the Bible, the history of Christianity, and the various religions of the world” (Taves 1999). What is striking here are the implications of such a hermeneutics: if Spiritualists interpreted the Bible through the empirical experience of the body in altered states, it is bodily experience itself that becomes the “doorway,” however unhinged, that opens the
“truth” of the text, and not the other way around. Bodily experiences—I saw, I heard, I touched, I felt—insofar as these can be articulated, are, after all, the medium through which experiential proofs of spiritual presence are read and authenticated. Moreover here, bodily experience is “universalized,” both through the democracy of mediumship—everyone can potentiality be a Medium, say the Spiritualists—and since the spirits are now deterritorialized from place and history. The mediumistic experience of the body in Spiritualism thus becomes, I would say, a kind of somatic oracle through which theological and dogmatic truths are verified.

Spiritualism narrated its own prehistory in terms of a historical progression that begins with the automaticity of the body—what the body reveals precisely in bypassing states of consciousness, as is the case in somnambulism or “waking dreams.” In this regard, automaticity is proof of something that endures in the body, and this, despite ourselves as conscious “subjects.” Such automaticity rested upon 18th century discoveries of “animal magnetism,” the unconscious of the body expressed as magnetic energies that could be manipulated and transferred between bodies. In Anton Mesmer’s hypnotic passes, through a combination of suggestion and gestures, making hand passes over the body—very similar to the way Spiritualist today pass their hands over the body of the sitter (hovering not touching) during spiritual healing sessions—there occurs a ‘manipulation of magnetic fluids,” which Mesmer believed “filled the universe and formed a connective link between humans and between humans and the cosmos” (Taves 1999, 125). Today, we might call these invisible transmissions by the name of affects, as in Teresa Brennan’s use of the term “affective transmissions,” as those invisible yet palpable threads that pass between bodies and constitute shifts in the sensory atmospheres of lived spaces (Brennan 2004). Spiritualism as a tradition based on the idea of “sympathetic chains” which link bodies together, may trace this emphasis to Adam Smith’s idea of the social body made to cohere
around moral “sympathy”—and Smith, interestingly, located living sympathy, ultimately, in our “sympathy with the dead” (Cox 2003:29).

Somnambulism and Mesmerism are here precursors to Spiritualism, as expressing the notion of a social body, based not in conscious or rational adherence, but in affective/emotional sympathies. Mesmerism was a re-balancing of individuals and thus social relations; mesmeric passes sought to correct the imbalance or depletion of magnetic fluids found in individuals through the powers of the healer, who is thought to have an “abundant supply of this fluid,” and capable of restoring the balance in the patient (Taves 1999, 125). The mesmerist would have, as his counterpart, the mostly female patient, who would then be induced into hypnotic states of clairvoyance. *Clairvoyance*: a French term defining “clear-sightedness, mental vision, or vision without the use of visual organs” (1999, 121). Spiritualism sought its own origins in the popular interest in the automatism of the body and such clairvoyant and somnambulist “trance” states, claiming, however, that such practices, in particular mesmerism, were but a stepping stone toward “ushering in the more comprehensive movement of Spiritualism,” and its full fledged communication with “intelligent” spiritual presences. Thus Spiritualist’s narrate an evolution from the “animal” automatism of the body to the “spiritual” *control* and skill of the medium. The passive and susceptible state of the *mesmerized* clairvoyant is here replaced, it seems, by the self-possessed clairvoyant Medium controlling her own slippage into altered states of trance.

Such physical and material groundings of altered states show how Spiritualism drew together “religious experience” and a secular, scientific discourse of the body. As such, Taves notes, Spiritualism “stands at the center of an ‘historical hourglass’” blurring the boundaries between “believers and skeptics, practitioners and observers—those who “experience religion and those who explain it in naturalistic terms” (1999, 166). What is drawn together is a scientific
interest in material proofs—that can be experimentally repeated, thus made to endure—and “religious experience,” where religion refers back to the material mediation of the body in states of “enthusiasm” (interpreted in secular and religious terms). Spiritualism here addresses itself to an evidential paradigm that seeks to make the visionary, ephemeral and immaterial—the spiritual — *endure*, in a form that can be transmitted as “proof” of a reality beyond so-called “subjective experience.”

1.2 William’s Many Faces

The Medium sits in the large Victorian chair, eyes closed, head facing forward. Only the aura of red light, from the red bulb, illuminates the remarkably white head of William. In its baldness the head is transformed into a *terra nullius*, a blank landscape and white screen that will convert amorphous spirit presences into identifiable *faces*. The nose grows longer, as you begin to see a dark side-burn emerge…dark hair grows and covers the baldness of the head like moss, his face shifting, changing and finally condensing into forms you are encouraged to “recognize”: A President! Abe Lincoln! My Brother! My Mother! An Indian!

The spirit face is not the face of the Medium, but an ectoplasmic screen, that cloud-like substance thought to issue from the body of the Medium herself. The screen/face extends from the body, which makes the body a medium or media of technological and spiritual extension, mediating between inside and outside. To be more specific, the faces change rapidly as they are at once projected upon and exuded from the head of the Medium, providing a background for their appearance. Like other ectoplasmic *materializations*, these screen-faces are understood to
Spiritualist transfiguration manifests a moment of separation in the autonomy of the spirit-image from the body, as this other mask-like face is foregrounded while the face of the Medium recedes into a background. In order to materialize such a spectral figure *separating* from the body, the Medium and spirit are described as *blending* into one another, articulating a visual and material dependence of the image and the body in a movement of division and convergence. The image (here the spirit face) needs the body for its manifestation. As one of my teachers explained to me, in mediumistic transfiguration the energy “builds up in front of the face of the medium,” and produces an ectoplasmic cloud-like “mask” which the spirit world “uses to press their faces” into. While this may be a form of “communication at a distance,” to use Frazer’s term, whereby the distant body is drawn near through making of a mimetic image, often composed of materials that have had contact with the body one wishes to make an image of, here, the principle of contact is one of spiritual “sympathy” (Frazer 1985). The body of the Medium is thus turned, through sensory attunement, into a site of contact with the spirit, a contact that is materially expressed in ectoplasmic forms. Through an energetic and sensory contact, the spirit uses the material of the medium’s body to make an image of itself, and this image is always more than an image, for it holds within itself the *event* of contact—the place of encounter—with a distant spirit body. So it seems, the distant image (of spirits) is directly tethered to the body (of the Medium) by means of this affective encounter, and effects, in the case of transfiguration or other ectoplasmic externalizations, the physical imprint of the spirit face on a substance that exudes from the body itself—all this occurring in a loopedy-looping of the near and distant, form and matter, image and flesh.
While there is not direct material contact in the formation of the ectoplasmic image—at least not a contact we can see—there is a sensuous and sympathetic contact (Taussig 1993). The image is imprinted, through the sensory reaching forth of the Medium, in the material of the body of the Medium, who in turn exudes the image, as a cloud-like substance. By contrast, in the Christian icon, painted according to the strict conventions of the Orthodox Church, says the Russian Orthodox theologian Evdomikov, the image does not bear the ontological substance of that of which it is an image. The material image, “does not contain any nature,” it neither “captures nor retains anything.” (1990, 196) The “wood and paint” that support the divine image do not retain any contact with the likeness that it takes on: “there is therefore no question of some ontological presence being absorbed into the matter of the icon.” Why does this distinction between substance and image matter? In thus defending the iconography of the Eastern Orthodox Church against the Protestant iconoclast, it must show that the icon is not an idol or a fetish—it does not claim to be that of which it is an image, but rather only to represent; thus the theology of the icon has at its center a confrontation with the meaning of “representation.”

There is, in other words, no contagion through contact, between image and matter. Yet, it is also thought that in representing a re-presencing takes place, in which the beholder of the icon can be transported into the image, and thus into an experience of God’s presence. The icon is a vehicle “of the presence” of God — but as vehicle, it shares nothing material with God. The icon then is both a marker of an ontological difference between divine spirit and earthly substance, between creator and creation (following from an already opposed substance and image) as well as a vehicle—perhaps a technology—of divine experience. While the defenders of icons are thus

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6 Evdomikov says that they (the iconoclasts) believe that the believer in icons believes, there to be an identification between the image and what it represents. This, interestingly, is the same ‘mistake’ Latour attributes to the secular iconoclast/critic in their charge against those who “believe” in fetishes (Evdomikov 1990; Latour 1998).
commonly thought to concede more power to images, it is within their boundary marking between image and substance that the “image” is reduced to something that “retains nothing” of the substance it reflects. Yet, even here when such a distinction between image and substance is carefully guarded so as not to slip into that side-long route called heresy, the icon presents a paradox: it merely “represents” the divine without containing it and yet is also said to be a vehicle we can enter into—both just an image, and more than an image. This paradox is all the more obvious when one considers the reproducibility of the icon as material object, a standardized painted image strictly bounded by guidelines of Church sanctioned representations that is “nevertheless a center from which divine energies radiate out” (Evdomikov 1990, 196).

In mediumship the distinction between substance and image becomes even more blurred. For, the substance of the body upon which the image “is pressed” does not remain safely distinguished from the image. It seems to me, the Medium’s body does “capture and retain” something of the spirit-nature that it absorbs. Unlike the wood or painted medium, the body makes a sensuous contact that risks becoming too affected by the spirits it encounters. Mediums tell me they must go to great length to let this contact by contagion pass through them unharmed, that is, to avoid absorbing the affects and sometimes, the literal sicknesses, of the spirits that communicate through them. The spirit figure or image, after all, draws itself through the substance of the Medium’s body, I am saying, even as it acts as an imprint for the face of the spirit.

The spirits make use of the body of the Medium, using the Medium’s body as an intensive site—a booth, or tent, to harken back to the disciple Peter’s offer—in which their appearance may be concentrated and made visible. The body is the material the spirits “use to press their faces,” to make of themselves images. The body thus participates in the image,
opening itself to the spirits, and is not merely a passive material upon which the image is imposed. Of course we might say this is the case with any medium in which one renders an image—the painter often speaks of the paint as ‘pushing back,’ and, I’m told, there is a magic moment when the movement of paint on a surface transitions from passive to active, wherein the painter feels as if the painting itself “takes over.” Even in its entranced stillness, the Mediums’ body is active in a passive receptivity. The body’s matter is not a matter of indifference to the image it manifests—it is not “mute matter” that neither “captures nor retains” anything, but a dynamic material diagram of sorts. In this sense, the body contains and intensifies the image.

Mediumship partakes in the logic of “image and iconicity” insofar as it generates communicable images in a mode of “immediacy” (Morris 2015 27). This immediacy of presence, however, while making “evident” spiritual forces, is caught within an empirical excess: namely the paradox of seeking to make empirically evidential, that which by definition exceeds empirical proof. The spirit-face appearing on the screen-head of William makes visible something that exceeds the visible—namely the sensory extension and intension of immaterial force. This sensory relation into and from the body, the relay of affect and percept, engenders dynamic “living” forms—spirits. As if, using the body of the Medium as a porous screen, these spiritual affects lets call them, press themselves into the affected body of the Medium in order to build new bodily forms. Spirit formation, then, I am saying, involves a double movement of affectivizing-the-form—here, the form of the spirit—and formalizing-the-affect (Brinkema 2014).

7 I will return to the relation between affect and abstraction in Part IV in the section: “Spirit as Fold: A Conversion of Far and Near.”
In this regard, the body of the Medium appears to be a strange icon: not an icon proper, one that marks and maintains the difference between matter and divine image, creation and creator, but an aberrant icon. Aberrant, because if mediumship makes of the body an icon, it is an icon that confuses the spiritual image and the material—the body—that holds the image. In this sense, mediumship points to a space of encounter between body and image as the place of spiritual experience, wherein spirits are realized and materialized. In these spirit forms—whether realized in words issued from the medium to a sitter, or as materializations of plastic shapes—strange and filmy inheritances are expressed as evidentially present to and within bodies. And these strange inheritances, these spirits, are difficult—difficult to discern, as the practice of mediumship and its techniques of the body reveals, and once discerned, are difficult to translate into words, to “paint to life,” as the Mediums describe it.

I can hear Wittgenstein’s mysterious remarks in his Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough. Frazier, he insists, dismisses the mythological thinking of prehistory as a stupid mistake, an error in our knowledge of causality. Against Frazier, Wittgenstein argues there is something in such myths, their language, ritual and performance that captures a desire in us—and thus cannot simply be dispelled by scientific reason alone (Wittgenstein 1993). What makes certain rituals and mythological language survive and resonate into the present, even as these no longer play the same social role, is a residual left-over that is nevertheless transmissible. An inheritance that continues to affect us, congealed in the symbols themselves, as if from the shadows of prehistory. Why, he asks, should the Celtic Beltane festival, which was said to originally have involved human sacrifice, still retain something “deeply sinister” about it, or, in what evidences of the present, does this “deep and sinister aspect” reside? What is “deep and sinister […] is not obvious just from learning the history of the external action [the fact of human sacrifice] but we
impute it *from an experience in ourselves.* [Italics mine]” (Wittgenstein 1993) It is not simply knowing the history of a particular ritual that makes it’s sense survive or endure; it is rather in something belonging to the ritual itself, carried through time in gesture and word—the affective consistency of a form of life that conveys to us, through time, the desire that lay behind the ritual in the first place. The *transmissibility* of such deep and sinister pasts, lies, so I take it from Wittgenstein, in the fact that the ritual conveys something found both in itself, as social form, and simultaneously in us, in “an experience in ourselves.” As the place of encounter of these invisible inheritances, *experience* is the meeting place of inside and outside. How, after all, can we have an experience belonging to an event that never happened to us, that never belonged to our “subjective” experience? Such events can be transmitted through *spirits,* as the Spiritualist claim, which, in any case, I am saying, names an affective attunement to an outside (the dead, which are also the past) as the immediate experience in the body—forces felt but not entirely understood. What is strange to me in accounts of having been struck by forces of a past invisible yet present, is how *self-evident* the fact of having been affected is—even as origin of the affect is murky and requires techniques of discernment to bring to the fore. It is to such internal experience of external pasts —now present as invisible bodies— that mediumship addresses itself.

1.3. Phantasmic Films

Phantasms are given off by bodies and are themselves spectral bodies: filmy layers forming composite images as these are given off by the encounters, co-minglings, and otherwise filmy-happenings as bodies enter into relation with one another. If the phantasm comes from the body, it is a spectral matter of the body.
Phantasms, like *events*, occupy the surfaces of bodies, and as Foucault points out they do not so much extend the bodily organism “into the imaginary,” as to “topologize the materiality of the body” (1970). What I’m calling *a spiritual geography of settlement* would thus be a topographic study, in this sense, of the way phantasms occupy the surfaces of bodies: a “swarming of the impalpable that must be integrated into our thought” (Foucault 1970). Following the phantasmic history of settlement allows us to return from the excess of abstracted images, “empty” yet powerful in their capacity to alienate and stand over the body, to the immanence of image and body. If the spirit-faces during William’s transfiguration appear through the mediation of the body of the Medium, it is as a body partaking in the history and logic of settlement even as it conjures unsettling effects. To think the spiritual geography of settlement is then to think the “material reality of incorporeal things: phantasms, simulacra, idols,” and by following these “unsettling” and de-centering surface-effects, appearing upon, in and between bodies, to make visible the periphery—the phantasm in its peripheral dance, a dance at the limit of every Center (Foucault 1970).

The idea of the body as a surface occupied by what Foucault called an “incorporeal materiality” or “events” of the surface, understands the phantasm as a figure arising at the edges of the body, as it encounters other bodies and these “collide, intermingle and suffer” (Foucault 1970; Deleuze 1988b). Phantasms are congealed *figures* of simulacra, images that invert the Platonic logic of original/copy, copies that no longer refer themselves but to an always prior original (Foucault 1970; Deleuze 1990). Foucault says of these phantasmic surface-effects that they escape the logic of analogy and thus subjectivity, in their swarming proliferation. This is the meaning of surface “events”—the event dislodged from the logic of history and representation, (which requires copies and originals) and the subject of consciousness. Freeing the phantasm, the
simulacra, would mean following these surface-effects of bodies as they “are left to come to light among the surfaces to which they are related, in the reversal that causes every interior to pass to the outside and every exterior to the inside” (Foucault 1970). The body gives rise to surface-effects because it is a site of encounter—and an encounter names a folding of inside and outside, where these are simply two sides of a surface touching one another. To be affected names this passage of incorporeal forces as they pass inside, becoming-images or rather phantasms, that again rise to the surface as they animate the outside, as presences independent of the bodies they came from.

The incorporeal phantasm is obviously stubbornly ephemeral. They cannot endure because they skirt the surface of things. But this also means that phantasms do not fall into the black holes of subjectivity and signification formed by the face; they are “surface events,” dislodged from the logic of history, representation and the subject of consciousness. Phantasms are ‘false’ images when viewed in opposition to the “true” image, as in the icon or Platonic form. As false images, phantasms do not descend from above, but arise from the encounters of bodies, even as they form the negative limit of a body—a spectral image of the body—made visible as the effect of a phantasmic operation: “they stick to bodies and protrude from them […] they touch them, cut them, break them into sections, regionalize them, and multiply their surfaces; and equally, outside of bodies, because they function between bodies according to laws of proximity, torsion […]” Unlike icons a vehicles which raise us up to the One, in the Platonic descent of Forms, phantasms are “mere shadows” arising from “elemental swamps” (Florensky 1996). Swampy images, they can be dangerous, they can overwhelm and pull us down. Dangerous and deceptive, such images can enslave us. On the other hand, in valorizing the dissimilar, that which cannot be defined by resemblance to a pre-existing Idea, or Form, Deleuze
wants to make the copy, simulacra, and by extension the phantasm—stand on their own, the “similar” beyond the idea of the over-determined copy. Thinking the relation between the body and its spectres—those phatasmic images that pass between inside and outside—is also to think the body as a space, giving rise to images, as much as being caught-up in the space of images. Taussig captures this mimetic “drama” of space, in his thoughts on Roger Caillois’ idea that mimesis is “a matter of “being tempted by space,” [...] in which the self is but a self-diminishing point amid others, losing its boundlessness” (Taussig 1993, 34). As if turning oneself inside-out, in this becoming-space, the “individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses,” and this, says Caillois, makes the individual “similar, not similar to something, but just similar” (Taussig 1993, 34). If the body can turn itself inside-out, “tempted by space,” in dissolution of form, this dissolution is at the same time a becoming-space, which is everything and nothing, a similarity without referent. The body here exceeds the bounds of representation and its inescapable teetering between copy and referent, in what appears to be a radical *ekstasis* of the body, a “‘degree zero’ of similitude, an ineffable plasticity,” where space and image merge, or we enter a space on the “other side of the senses” (Taussig 1993, 34).

Spiritualist mediumship in this sense, I am saying, makes visible the secret workings of the ‘machine,’ and for that matter, its secret complicity with North American settlement, insofar as it makes the body the site of colonized and displaced phantasms, converted to recognizable “proofs” or evidences of settlements “spiritual” appropriations. The story of the white Medium assimilating the power of the “other,” performed as a public secret of “knowing what not to know,” to borrow Taussig’s phrase, is not the only secret here, for this story hides the even deeper secret of bodily mediation, repeatedly displaced from view. Or it is the story of the phantasm as surface-event, as that which occupies the surfaces of bodies at the limit of
representations. Here even the most vague, and thus recognizable figure—I see an Indian!—is a phantasmic image, a copy, it is similar, but similar to whom? The phantasm does not lead us to an actual “Indian,” nor does it take up the history or presence of actual Native Americans in any way. Nor does the phantasm represent other Indians to us, at least not insofar as it is not treated as a symbol but as an animate image.

I wonder if the Medium, in this facial scene of transfiguration, is making visible the working of the so-called “abstract machine of faciality” as something that converts bodies into codes, and here, unrecognizable spirits into generalizable “faces”—I see an Indian! (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 181). The face, after all, has a history, is a contingent formation of power (pouvoir not puissance) that is socially produced, yet hides this contingency behind a “universalizing,” codifying, mask: the face manifesting itself as everywhere at all times (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 175). The face which codes, and thus converts the body to code, does not, to use other language, allow room for the body, which would reveal its dependence upon the materially contingent, upon a difference that is always exceeding its codification. Could we say that in laying bare the secret reliance of the face on the body itself as that which mediates specters in the first place, is made visible in this very scene of transfiguration? The cloud-like face of the Indian witnessed on the face of the Medium is received by the audience as an image ready to be recognized—not only because it appears as “face” which converts, by signifying and subjectivizing, whatever phantasmic intensities of the other might rise up, but also because such a face is an already converted image of the settler’s imagination of the Indian. If the face makes everything into a face that can be read and recognized and generalized (gendered, racialized, sexualized), mediumship, I want to say, opens onto faces only to betray their reliance on bodies.
Mediumship makes “present” what was absent, visible what was invisible, such that spectres can be witnessed and construed as *evidence*—yet in all this revealing, nothing is revealed. And isn’t this in part because what the Medium seeks to make evidential exceeds communication? The Medium confronts an excess of communication, a communication that locates itself beyond the limits of life, as the incommunicable experience of the dead. The images that rise up—as recognizable spirit faces—always hide further images, a swarming proliferation of images. If death is incommunicable it is at least in part because the dead confront the living as present absences, ephemeral phantasms that are both present to a body, yet never fully graspable. If they endure, they only endure for a moment. Their recognizability is a fleeting surface-effect—a Proteus escaping our grasp no matter how hard we try to hold on—within the empirical, and thus sensory excess, of spiritual evidences.

If spirit mediumship is marked by the “valorization of presence,” or at least the “conflicted aspiration to return, to presence” it is also about making visible an “absence,” a chasm within experience, as much as within communication (Morris 2015, 25). Something in experience that is always latent, the “missed encounter,” to use Lacan’s term. Not least because what appears quickly disappears, the faces vanish and the medium “forgets”—we are left only with the traces of specters, vague lines of associations connecting images that quickly become specters of doubt—what did we see anyway? And how can we trust our own sensory experience, when that experience is of something that draws us ultimately beyond the sensible to the supersensible world of spirits? Thus to make the spirits visible, to perform spirit presence, as a revelation of secrets, only draws you further into what is hidden within this double thing called “a body,” which, I’m arguing, is an entity occupied by past-presences—spirits or phantasms—and thus is never properly in-the-present.
1.4. On Precipitated Spirit Painting

The gallery of portraits cover all four walls in the Assembly Hall at Lily Dale, the same hall in which William’s transfiguration took place. Here, staring back at you, one encounters the many faces of prominent Spiritualists, either painted or photographed. They capture the past, contained in paint or celluloid, of the expression of the face, or a face upon a bust—a partial person. During a visualization exercise, as part of a course in mediumship, I was seated in this same room. We were told to visualize ourselves in a thick fog, and to wait for the spirits to emerge from that fog to approach us. Sitting perfectly still on cold collapsible chairs, hands in lap and with my eyes closed, surrounded by fifteen other practitioners in the same posture, the cloud of fog become tangible. I breathed in and the air was thick around me. I opened my eyes and saw that same fog still surrounding me. In this moment a woman appeared, as if stepping out of one of the photographs. I still felt she was in my mind’s eye more than an appearance in the room, but the fog itself was somehow inside and outside at once. As is often the case in such exercises, it both felt real and not real. Surely, this was my imagination at work—the spirit from the photographs conjured into the room by my imagining… while at the same time, didn’t the air feel thick like fog? Things felt and seen in the space of mediumstic practice…

It has struck me during these courses in mediumstic technique that the way the Medium carves out an inner space in her body, for the precipitation of images, resembles the workings of a pinhole camera: in allowing the light—and light is what the spirits are often described as—to enter in, the body seems to “develop” images within itself, and of course, as is often noted, an analogy to photography is already here in the commonly used language of mediumstic “development.” The body becomes like the black box of a camera, a cabinet in its own right,
precipitating images within. But sometimes mediumistic images are also “precipitated” outside of the body. One of the greatest examples of physical mediumship is to be found in the rare phenomena of “precipitated spirit painting,” of the late 19th century and into the early twentieth century. Ron Nagy, a devoted Spiritualist, curator and person very much at large and in charge of the small ramshackle Museum at Lily Dale, wrote a small book on the subject in 2006, in which he describes such spirit painting as the means by which a likeness appears on a canvas “without the use of human hands,” comparing it to one of the many “other inventions of those times including the telephone, telegraph, Edifone etc.”—inventions “not understood but accepted” (Nagy 2010, 2). In comparing precipitated painting to these emergent 19th century communication technologies, Nagy is echoing the 19th century Spiritualist alignment of emergent technology and spirit communication. He describes the process of spirit painting thusly:

The canvas is new and clean. A “pot” of paint is used with all the colors of the spectrum placed in it. No brushes are used or are in the room or area where the séance is taking place. The medium is present, along with the sitter and observers. The séance is usually done by appointment but in many instances auditoriums were used and random numbers were drawn to pick the sitter who would be requesting a painting. The spirit entity whom the sitter is mentally requesting to “come through” or appear on the canvas is usually unknown to the medium. The framed canvas is placed on an easel, stood on a table, and lightly held by the medium or mediums, one on each side. In some instances the canvas is laid flat, facing up on a table with all in attendance placing their palms down on the table around the canvas. The pot of paint is placed in front of or on the floor near the canvas. The lights are dimmed for mood, but never completely darkened. The mediums go into trance and the sitter observers are in a meditative state, completing an energy circle. The sitter mentally visualizes the loved one who has passed on into spirit life and whom they would like to appear. Slowly, like a Polaroid photograph develops, the painting begins to appear. It usually takes fifteen minutes to an hour for the precipitation process to be complete [italics mine] (2010, 2-3).

The painting appears without the agency of eye or hand, interrupting the intimate connection between gesture and paint belonging to the practice of painting. Here, the image “develops” as if by its own agency, phantasmically likened to the sudden appearance in celluloid of a
photographed image. Such spirit paintings are not painted, but “precipitated”: precipitation names the condensation and intensification of particles into a cloud-like form. In Freud’s first psychoanalytic case study of hysteria, Anna O.’ used the word “clouds” to describe her condition-seconde, as if implicitly understanding her own somnambulant states as condensations, a word Freud would use again and again, of the affects and images that built-up within her; these affects would then precipitate in the form of bodily symptoms: contracted gestures and hallucinatory states. The precipitated symptom is thus the effect of what was gathered and intensified in the body of the hysteric, the condensation of affecting material that is expressed as always out-of-joint with the present. The hysteric, I want to say, condenses entire atmospheres within her, belonging to an elsewhere that is precipitated in the present aberrant states of her body. Not unlike the Medium, the hysteric would forget what happened in her altered state or condition-seconde. Breuer describes her inability to recognize people who were once familiar to her. In order to identity those around her, she had to run through an almost forensic list of singular attributes, one by one (presumably by touch), saying, “the nose is like this, and the hair like that, so it has to be so and so” (Freud, Breuer 2004, 30). Like a Medium with her words, Anna O. “paints” the once familiar become unfamiliar, “back to life.”

If the hysteric precipitates the symptom, materializing such affects in inner states and outer gestures, precipitated spirit painting occurs by condensing what lies in the inner space of the sitter—the memory or image of the loved one—but also the energy in the room. And by energy, it seems Nagy also has in mind the room itself, which is transformed into a “fine dust,” condensed and the precipitated upon the image that appears on the canvas. What is this magical transition whereby space itself is precipitated into an image? Nagy writes: “The pot of multicolored paint […] reacts to the combined magnetism of the mediums along with everything
else in the room or space that is being used for the precipitation séance. The walls, rugs, curtains, and even flowers (which were often used) react to the magnetism and transform into the fine dust-like substance that creates the painting.” Of the material that appears on the canvas it is said to be “like soot” and “comes off on the finger, a smutty oil substance,” and while somehow the paint pots are used during the precipitation of the image, Nagy says the portraits are not made of “paint, ink, pastel, nor any known substance [italics mine]” (2010, 11). He adds, quoting a famous description of unknown origin, “it could be compared to the dust on a butterfly’s wings” and wonders if this has something to do with the transformation of oil paint when “chemically altered by spirit” becoming “as light as pollen” and appearing as “spectrum-colored dust” (2010, 84). The entire atmosphere, the room itself, by a strange material inversion is condensed into an image, an image made of the space become colorful dust, a dust “as light as pollen” onto the canvas. And if all paint pigments originate in “nature” before their modern chemical transubstantiation, what to make of this poetic idea of a spiritual transubstantiation of the present atmosphere into color—a spectrum of colors coloring the flesh of the spirit on canvas?

The room thus condensed, becomes a face or maybe the substance through which a face can be pressed and take form. I can think of no better parallel to describe what occurs in mediumistic practice—where the outside (of sensation, thought, spirits, what exactly?) is folded in through the sensate surface of the body where images form. The Medium makes of her body an inner cabinet where, not only spirit-images but entire spiritual atmospheres are precipitated as inner films.

A different account of precipitated spirit painting, describes the work of the famous “Bang Sisters,” Elizabeth S. and May E. Bangs of Chicago, “who had the gift of direct writing,
drawing, and painting,” but were most known for the richness of color and detail. Here the role of sunlight in the development of the image is emphasized.

Two identical [blank] paper mounted canvases in wooden frames were held up face to face against the window with the lower half resting upon a table, and the sides held by each sister with one hand. A short curtain was hung on either side, and an opaque blind was drawn over the canvases. The light streamed from behind the canvases, which were translucent, and after a quarter of an hour the outline of shadows began to appear and disappear as the invisible artist made a preliminary sketch; then the picture began to grow at a feverish rate. When the pictures were separated, the portrait was found on the surface of the canvas next to the “sitter” (Swann 1897, 3).

Nagy notes that in a later stage of their mediumistic “development,” the Bang sister’s no longer had need of a quasi-photographic apparatus—the “locked cabinet or curtained-off space,” which sometimes took several “sittings” to complete—but “were openly precipitated as if by airbrush, and some took as little as five minutes to complete” (2010, 82).

In this account the emphasis is placed on sunlight streaming through the window as the agent developing the spirit image, while the surface of the painting remains hidden behind a curtain. May Bangs wrote, in a letter of 1910, that “the room is shaded sufficiently to cause all the light from the window to pass through the canvas, thus enabling the sitter to witness the development and detect the least change in the shadows” (Nagy 2010, 10-11). Are the Bang sisters, who are credited with “the first recorded demonstration of precipitated spirit painting” in 1894, here mimicking the simple function of the camera, by enclosing the canvas with dark curtains on all sides, allowing light to stream in from a focal point? Also of note is the temporality of this image—the process is initially described as slow but then picking up speed, “feverishly,” until the portrait is completed, sometime in half an hour—“much faster” as Nagy is fond of pointing out, than if it had been painted by human hands. It is as if in organizing the
body, the pain, the canvas, and natural light in mimicry of photographic technologies, such
“demonstrations” of the working of spirit revealed the power of the body (spiritually,
energetically, sensorially) in its capacity as a technology—only better—for the body can
mediate, not only images, but spirits!

What is more, the images produced are not the statically dead images of the photograph
as index of momentary reality, but animate images that respond and change, that is, behave in
relation to the sitter and the Medium. Even when the spirit image is materialized upon something
as concrete as a canvas, the images behave like the images experienced in the inner theater of the
Medium—that is, as a dynamic image. Often when the image appears, it will correct itself: “The
spirit entity that has now appeared and embedded his or her image on canvas may have a
crooked bow tie or a hair out of place. The defect will disappear as if some motherly entity is
mentally focusing on creating a perfect likeness” (Nagy 2010, 3). And, Nagy notes repeatedly
that the eyes will often “gradually open, giving a life-like appearance to the whole face” (11).

Stranger still, the image is responsive to the desires of the sitter—not unlike a witness
describing a criminal to a forensic artist, the sitter may intervene in the paintings. Reportedly, a
Mrs. Gertrude Breslan Hunt, from Norwood Park Illinois, requested a spirit painting by the
famous Bang Sisters in 1909, but while the painting was “in process” she “requested several
changes” to the painting: “Mrs. Hunt objected to the pose and asked that it be full face. The
entire face obediently faced away and was rapidly re-sketches. Mrs. Hunt then commented that
the hair was too light and the cheeks should be more colorful. As she sat observing, the shadows
began to intensify in the waves of the hair until it darkened, the cheeks gained more color and the
sleeves of the robe were also altered” (Nagy 2010, 13). What to make of these portraits that
animate, slowly opening their eyes to look back at the living, as they change to conform to the
sitters idea of their deceased loved one? If they are condensations of the energy and material of the room—into some particulate “unknown” matter, as Nagy says—they are also precipitations of the mnemonic images of the deceased we carry in us—as the intervention of the sitter upon the portrait shows. And yet, given their animate movement, these paintings are not just memories, if by memory we mean something safely sequestered to a dead past.

It is interesting how portraits, so popular in the 19th century, particularly for their connection to the dead—the death-mask, moment mori, and of course, the spirit photograph—seem to engage a deeper need, and a problem, of how to make the past endure in the image, to insist beyond the death of the body. As if it is to the disappearance of the body that such images address themselves. Maybe this is why there is an insistence in Nagy’s accounts, and the citations from Spiritualist editorials, that spirit paintings are not “copies” of photographs. Even when the sitter is invited to bring a photograph of the deceased with them, it is said they do not show the Medium the photograph but keep it concealed, until the portrait is finished. This emphasis on the Medium having not seen the photograph seems to be a reassurance against the accusation that the Medium is somehow copying the image—either directly from a photograph, or perhaps from her own memory onto the canvas—the latter, while still magical if the painting was “precipitated,” would be problematic as it still discounts the agency of spirits. And it seems important to Nagy to make this distinction, as he goes on to say that the portraits do not “resemble” the photograph because they often differ in stance and apparel. At the same time, elsewhere it is stated, in a excerpt from the Spiritualist newspaper The Sunflower dated 1905, that a Mr. & Mrs. Beckwith, who wanted portraits of the deceased children, “compared their portraits to the photographs [they had brought with them] and marveled at the likeness” (Nagy 2010, 29). Nagy goes on to say that these portraits, apart from their being in color, “in all
respects resemble photographs taken by a camera” (2010, 27). The verifiability of the spirit painting seems to depend on its not being merely a copy of an image—presumably to ward off the accusation that the Medium somehow copied the photograph—and yet, the fact that there should be a resemblance between the photograph (later revealed) and the painting, here grounds the veracity of the spirit image. And given that a distinction is drawn here between true image and copy, what of the set-up used by the Bang sisters that, in its initial phases, resembles a photographic experiment—the canvas curtained off like a black-box, light streaming in from a single location? Why, in other words, the emphasis on painting as a spiritual medium, instead of photography, since photography is the emergent technology of the mid-19th century and mimicked in the operation of spirit painting? These distinctions within mimicry between photographs and paintings, between memory and spirit presences, seem aimed at securing the animacy of the spirit image as an auratic image. Yet the analogy to photography makes the Medium one who can reproduce the “image” again and again, at least, with the help of the spirits. The photographic image which indexes the moment of a sudden exposure is a static image when set against this strange liveliness and plasticity of the spirit painting: the look of life in the eyes, the claim that the image changes and shifts after exposure. Recall the eyes, which are said to often open after the séance as the painting changes and conforms to the will of the sitter, correcting any “defect […] as if some motherly entity is mentally focusing on creating a perfect likeness”(3). The emphasis is not on the painted image as “perfect likeness” but as a living and dynamic entity—thus an animate and changing entity—perhaps like the portrait of Dorian Grey, only instead of revealing the dark-side, the spirit is always portrayed at their best, in a spiritual light. A distinction between spirit photography and precipitated painting also lies in the changing role of the Medium. When precipitating a painting, the Medium is engaging with the spirits
actively and energetically, while, by contrast, most spirit photography is treated as second-order indexical evidence of the event of the mediumistic manifestation of a spirit presence. Spirit photographs as an indexical record are understood as evidential images of an always prior event of mediumistic spirit materialization, and not, as in the precipitated spirit image, of an animate spirit figure congealed in paint. Thus the mechanical set-up of spirit painting mimicking the photographic apparatus so as to emphasize the lack of human intervention in the process—consistent with what has been called the “ideology of mechanical objectivity”—at once directs us away from human agency while claiming an other-than-human agency, the agency of the spirit (Daston, Galison 2007). The Medium thus imitates the photographic apparatus, while claiming to do with her body what the photograph cannot do—that is, to see and sense what the “objective” camera eye, or the naked eye for that matter, cannot see—what is, at least visibly and visually, not there. For the image precipitated is, after all, of the dead. The sense I draw from all this is that somehow spirit painting, in directing images back through the body, seems to affirm the body as the Medium of all media and thus the condition of the re-animation of not only “dead” spirits, but “dead” (as in reproducible) images. For if spirit painting congeals the atmospheres of the present—the actual room in which the painting process is taking place—it also folds this present atmosphere with what is absent, the latent images (memories?) of the sitter and the spirits of the dead themselves, which together appear on the canvas. The remembered images, as held in the past-tense of the indexical photograph—this happened!—as well as the dead who are by definition in the past—are thereby re-animated by mixing with the stuff of the present atmosphere or “room,” that subtle “dust” (like the “dust of butterfly wings”) of the present.
We can still see the residual emphasis on painting, despite a decline in such practices, in the very common language Mediums use in describing spirit communication as “painting the dead back to life.” Perhaps painting, moreso than photography, is a chosen medium of the spirits because painting does something that mediumship also does: it involves a turning inside-out of the body, extending itself sensorially upon the surface as it mixes with another substance (in the case of painting the paint, and here the atmosphere of the room), while directing our attention not only at the image, but at the evidential signs of time and gesture congealed upon the canvas. Perhaps painting points us toward the temporality of visionary experience itself, as an imagistic event within the body, unfolding in animate atmospheres, inner theaters of sensation communicated through hand, eye and color, releasing “presences beneath representation, beyond representation” (Deleuze 2003, 45). The spirit, through the mediating body, makes itself visible—here manifested on a canvas and in color—as a living-after-effect of the embodied vision that occurs before in the body of the medium. Or there is a collapsing of before and after, the visionary experience of the body and the manifestation of the spirit in paint, in a simultaneous moment. Spirit painting seems to confuse inside and outside, space and image in the externalization of an immaterial sensory event occurring within the Medium, as well as a material intensification and condensation of space itself, the space of the room pulverized into a paint-like-dust which makes up the image (Nagy 2010, 84).

It is said that the Bang Sisters, along with the Campbell Brothers, were the only mediums to have successfully made precipitated spirit paintings. As the only known precipitators of spirit paintings, according to Nagy, the Bang Sisters and Campbell Brothers are themselves legendary figures of physical mediumship. The paintings are impressive portraits in their own right—there is something slightly out of focus about them, something ethereal in the faces, particularly in
those I’ve seen by the Bangs Sisters. Two of the “finest” portraits by the Campbell Brothers hang in the Maplewood hotel in a modest sitting room just off of the front porch: an almost life-sized portrait of Azur the Great, the “guide” of the Campbell Brothers, and one of Lincoln. As Robert Cox notes, “according to opponents and proponents of the movement, even the White House was infested with Spiritualists.” And “as one critic put it, “Lincoln was a ‘spiritualists of the abolitionist school’ and insisted that “unlike our old fashioned presidents, who were compelled to consult the constitution,” Lincoln descended “in a secret hold of the White House” to consult “a rapping table,” which served as “law, constitution and gospel” (Cox 2003,163). It is often noted, as part of Spiritualist history, that Lincoln hosted a few séances in the White House and that his wife Mary Todd is claimed as a medium. There are many paintings also by the Bangs Sisters at Lily Dale, including a very ethereal portrait of a girl with golden hair, which hangs in the National Spiritualist Association of Churches office (NSAC) at Lily Dale, and a few others of what looks like idyllic “noble Indian” children, one entitled “Smart Weed” and the other “Blossom.” The one of Blossom is of a Pocahontas like figure wearing a white flowing costume and standing before Arcadian ruins and forest, as if in in a painting by Poussin.

In the spirit of a psychic investigator and forensic anthropologist, Nagy studies the eyes of these paintings, which he concludes all have in common the absence of eyelashes and, “what seemed to be images within the pupils.” The tell tale signs that a painting was “precipitated” by spirits and not made by human hands, is that there are “no eyelashes” and that the “paint still feels ‘wet,’” which, as Nagy claims, is the case with those of the Campbell Brothers and Bangs Sisters, though the paintings are now “over a hundred years old”! In the introduction of his book he says he felt “the reason that Spirit chose me to write this book is to clarify and organize all the

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8 Notably, Cox calls into question the welding by historians and Spiritualists alike of the early movement as one of reformers and notes the paucity with which race and abolition has been explored in comparison to feminist concerns. (Cox 2003,163).
scattered information” on the subject of precipitated paintings, but also “to justify once and for all the validity of precipitated art.” What is most telling about his quasi-scientifically minded investigations, is that they occur like all things at Lily Dale, by that strange mixture of “chance encounters” that everyone knows are really spirit-driven correspondences.

One day an “Iridologist” came to the museum whom Nagy defines as “a health care professional who, by analyzing the iris of the eye, can assist in finding out what is going on inside the body.” Not unlike phrenology of the 19th century, which examined the head like a map depicting the anatomical and psychological states of the body, the iridologist (considered at best a form of alternative medicine, at worst pseudo-science) reads the state of bodily organs through the window of the iris. He devotes a section of the book to her findings—describing the health down to the organs by studying the eyes of the famous portrait of Lincoln, by the Campbell Brothers, which hangs in the Maplewood hotel, and that of Mrs. A.B. Caldwell, by the Bang sisters. He also spends some time defending spirit painting against would-be skeptics, by citing theories of “magnetisim” and “polar rhythm” to explains the way spirits act upon matter to produce such evidences. In this very Spiritualist confluence of “scientific” investigation, Nagy searches out “natures” truths and concludes himself successful: “I have proven that there is life after the change called death, and Spirits is becoming us to understand more fully what awaits us in the afterlife. Phenomena can still occur today. We must be only be able to slow our minds and our harried lifestyles to be aware of the signs from Spirit” (Nagy 2010, 116).

A Certain Iconicity

Icons, it is often said, behold us as we behold them—we are taken in and up (spiritually, mystically) through the gaze of the icon. It is in the figurative properties of the icon, as a face
gazing back at you, that makes it conducive somehow for beholding, at a remove, the “countenance” of the divine. If there is an aesthetics of iconicity to mediumship it is captured in the portraiture at Lily Dale, in the practices of precipitated painting and spirit drawing—themselves perhaps living memento mori—as well as in the spiritual transfiguration of the face, and the more common face-to-face of the medium with her sitter. However, by contrast to the icon as vehicle of transcendence, in these “precipitated” spirit portraits, the dead materialize directly on the canvas. Here, we are not so much taken up, to behold the divine countenance, as the de-materialized faces of the dead are brought down to us, re-materialized and re-animated, so to speak. And this, using paints set out by the Medium, but also somehow composed of that ethereal matter, like the dust on a butterfly’s wings, in the “room”—as if the face is made up of everything immediately in the atmosphere, intensified into the small space of a portrait. Here we also find a face, but one slow to look back at us. As already mentioned, the dead person is often depicted initially with their eyes closed, only to open, as the painting is completed: “the eyes will be closed on the portrait and suddenly open as if they had been apprehensive or shy about appearing on canvas” (Nagy 2010, 3). These eyes shy to return the gaze, show signs of life, according to the Spiritualist. Described with enthusiasm by Nagy, precipitated spirit portraits are “spellbinding”—full of “depth and desire.” If one wants to authenticate such a portrait, Nagy advises, one must “first look at the eyes.” It is the eyes that will reveal the truth—do they look “alive”? Are they “penetrating”? The portrait does not simply gaze back, or for that matter, capture the gaze of the onlooker, but congeals, it would seem, the event of becoming-animate of the image.

Visionary experience relates itself foremost, I am saying, to an inner space of the body, and not first through an external image that looks back at you. In the embodied visions of the
Medium, the body is engaged in a form of perception that takes it beyond “sight,” beyond the limits of the eyes, toward extra-sensory events of seeing “extra-beings” (Foucault 1970). The otherness that appears does not appear as a face in the first moment, but as a sensory experience occurring in the body. Take Caravaggio’s famous painting, *St. Paul on the Road to Damascus*. In this painting, Paul is pictured lying on the ground, arms outstretched to the heavens, and eyes closed. We are not invited in to the face of Paul, into the gaze of the saint in his awakening to God voice. Rather, the visionary experience shuts out the gaze and turns inward, to a space of blindness, which is simultaneously the place of a super-sensory vision. What Paul experiences is a blinding light that paradoxically clears a space for the vision in darkness to appear—beneath closed eyelids. The vision takes over the body, pushes the face into the background, turning the head away from beholding the outside world, because what happens inside is *too much*.

Even in the case of transfiguration, the Medium does not channel the spirits through her face—it is not the face that reveals the spirits’ presence, it is not the face beholding the other in its gaze—but the body that mediates the spirits-become-faces, even as the body remains hidden (as in the darkness of the medium’s “cabinet”). To behold the face of the Other, whether we are talking about painted icons, or Christ’s transfiguration, or the Other that is my neighbor, there is, as Levinas says, an ethics in the face. Here, however, the encounter with a face, whether precipitated on a canvas, or formed on the surface of the Medium’s face (as in William’s transfiguration) is not an ethical face-to-face, so much as it refers us back to the *experience* of the body in its virtual encounters. The image has a way of separating itself from the medium in which it arises, but also of simultaneously pointing back at the medium as medium, as WJT Mitchells says: “the image is the uncanny content of a medium, the shape or form it assumes, the
thing that makes its appearance in a medium while making the medium itself appear as medium” (Mitchell, Hansen 2010, 40).

So I want to say that the materialization of spirits is an externalization of the event of visionary experience occurring in the body, and involves a kind of petrification of the body—the body recedes into the background, so as to make room for images to animate the surface. William sits still in trance, eyes closed, his body becoming a frozen vessel for the manifestation of animate forces. The medium recedes to make room, a second-space within herself, for the appearance of the spirits. This “making room” for images is the opening of an intensive space within the Medium. Here, the body is at once drawn close, through the Medium’s attention to images—thereby appearing itself as a medium of mediation in Mitchell’s sense—and is at the same time distanced, becoming an object or space of attention.

If the body is an icon, immanently communicative of spirit presences, it is insofar as the body can contain and intensify the sensation—making it endure long enough to become “a spirit” recognizable to an interpretant. After all, an icon, in the Peirceian sense, always contains the firstness of qualities that strike our sensations before they congeal into a representation—these pure qualities such as “color, texture, and shape” thus are carried along, contained, in the iconicity of the image itself, as real presences, and not merely as representations. In the medium’s body, it is through the firstness of sensation passing into the bodily space, that a figure or icon begins to take shape, and while this shape endures long enough to be expressed or materialized—exuded externally, for example, as in an ectoplasmic figure—the figure itself remains (as I will show) always closer to the plasticity of firstness, teetering, somehow, between
a formless quality and form. If the body is itself an icon of spirit presences, it is as a plastic icon, shifting and changing with the “flow” of the spirit.

How then does a specifically Spiritualist mediation of spirits—in the body of the Medium—bring the invisible realm of the spirits into figures or shapes? How do these qualities (that figure into spirits) become available to experience in the first place? The question also concerns how sensations or affects become figural entities enveloping the medium’s sensorium—and spirits no less—that teeter between firstness and thirdness, quality and icon, sensation and abstraction.

On the Ephemeralty of Evidences

Today, in the absence of precipitated painting—which was rare even in the 19th century—one finds many who draw “automatically,” under the guidance of a spirit. The medium usually has a number of guides who work with her, bringing her spirits of the deceased who are connected to the sitter. As the guides bring through the spirit she draws them.

A woman, shorter in stature takes the stage at the front of the Spiritualist Church in New Jersey. She is spritely, has short bobbed brown hair and stands in front of a large easel. She reminds us in an affable way that the “spirits demand they “look good” when being drawn back to life — I mean, “who wants to have their portrait made on their death bed?!” Without intending to, she has drawn a distinction between memento mori, drawings or photographs of the dead in postures “as if” still living, and spirit drawing, in which the spirit of the deceased presents itself to the medium as living, an animate image in her minds eye. The medium sketches “automatically,” on paper. The medium laughs and then turns to the easel, her back facing the

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9 I have conversations with E. Valentine Daniel to thank for this Peircian insight, regarding the between first and thirdness of ectoplasmic forms.
audience. Her hand moves deftly over the canvas, making precise strokes with a bit of charcoal. As she draws she calls out the trait she is drawing… This man had a strong Adam’s apple—he’s showing me his Adam’s apple… he doesn’t mind showing his age… he is showing me crows feet. He was very handsome and liked women… a bit of a flirt really, but, he tells me, “I didn’t do anything wrong!” Laughter from the audience. She goes on.

Another spirit is coming through. This woman had light hair, “you know, a kind of bowl cut” she draws what looks like a dark halo around the head to indicate the lightness of the hair. She is forensically precise about each trait — like a criminal sketch artist. The nose was short, almost turned up. The jaw was square, the eyes were light, the face long but round…

The shadowy face begins to appear on the whiteness of the paper. She once again turns to the audience, and now, animatedly gesturing, begins to describe the personality of the spirit. A fair haired woman with a bowl cut—a sort of 80’s hair cut, Rita says. The woman has now been “brought through.” She looks to be in her 60’s thereabouts and Rita tells us (all the while drawing) that she liked to work in the garden… was always just happy to be outside and had, generally, had an—the “glass is half full” kind of attitude about life. She wore a kind of gardening working outfit—“very LL Bean.” As she was describing the woman thus, and seeing the emergence of the face, George, a fellow medium seated in the audience, raises his hand. Rita turns to George directing the message at him: She says you spend a lot of time worrying and if this woman believes the glass is half full, you believe its half-empty. She tells you to “get out of your head” and “look around” and enjoy what is. You are worrying — she also tells you to “take walks.” To which a somewhat perplexed George replies with a smile, “I already do!” After the demonstration he informs me that for some reason mediums always give him the same message, to lighten up, to stop worrying—which isn’t at all what he is like, he tells me. George,
it should be noted, spent most of his life working as a clown in the circus and to look at him, sullen with a long face, kind but serious eyes—he is the spitting image of the sad clown. He said they often “read” him that way, because he seems “reserved” while sitting there—the implication being that the Medium’s message came more from a “reading” of his body language than as a message from spirit. It is not at all an uncommon thing to hear one Medium express suspicion about another “reaching,” “fishing” or just being off the mark. But giving messages is also the hardest part of mediumship—the “evidential information”—facts such as how they looked, how they died, where they are from, what their relation is to the sitter—are easier to “get” than the message, wherein you feel your way into the spirit to draw out what it is they want to convey to the living recipient of the message. And it is often remarked upon by Mediums and sitters alike, that the “messages” don’t say much other than sentimental anodyne sentences like “she wishes to say that she is watching over you,” etc.

Also notable were the reactions from the audience. On two occasions, even before the face began to appear (the hair alone was visible) a woman in the audience let out a shriek of recognition followed by little shrieks, half laughing and half crying. As Rita began describing this person with words and got deeper into the visage, it actually turned out to be a message for someone else. She politely apologized and said, “I’m sorry but I believe I’m with this person over here,” addressing herself to the next audience member. “So I’ll leave this with you with love and light.” She went on to describe a boy in his 20’s and 30’s with light hair, who died “suddenly.” Two women seated in the row behind me, a mother and daughter, raised their hands saying “that’s him!” tears welling up in their eyes, “that him but he was much younger, around 15.” As the Medium connected with these two women she did in fact bring through more detail: he wore sunglasses all the time (a specific brand, which the medium knew), he liked to dye his
hair, sometimes multiple colts at once (yes, yes, the two women nodded), he mentions tattoos. *Are there tattoos?* Rita asks. Before she can even finish her sentence, the women are nodding, saying “yes, yes, we both got tattoos after his death… for him!” The Medium gets that he died in a car accident, that he was a rebellious kid, “not a bad kid, but liked to push limits…” the two women are very emotional when they hear this, nodding in confirmation.

On other occasions two mediums will work together, the one drawing while the other communicates with the spirit and talks to the audience. The idea being both Mediums will connect to the same spirit vibration and communicate in tandem with the same spirit—the one painting her to life through drawing, the other through words. Spirit writing, drawing or painting is always for someone, and directed at authenticating a relationship between an invisible spirit and a living witness. While a medium may commune with the spirits in private, as far as the practice of mediumship goes, the focus is upon communicating the presence of the spirits to others, and thus verifying the “continuity of life.” In this sense, it seems the spirits only show up in a theater of evidence where their presence must be confirmed. Or, to put it another way, although a medium may commune with the spirits whenever and wherever she likes, mediumistic practice presupposes and aims at a witness for whom the spirit is “brought through,” and to whom the spirit addresses itself.

Spirit mediation is in this way, I am saying, always triangulated between sitter, Medium and spirit, and is built upon always ephemeral moments of communication. I am referring to the ephemerality of the expressions that appear as proofs—and these having in no small way to do with the presumed “automaticity” of mediumship. The spirit passes through, and “what comes,” comes without the intervention of conscious thought—whether in the Medium’s utterances as message to a sitter, in the case of automatic writing, appearance of a spirit image as we saw in
the transfiguration, or as occurs in spirit drawings. The ephemerality or fleeting character of the
spirit encounter further arises from the sense that presence is never a priori assumed, though
always anticipated. The spirits appear in séance rooms, and in “sittings,” where the air is thick
with an aura of anticipation. The spirits seem more like actors whose entrance upon the stage is
expected, and therefore “trusted,” yet is nevertheless met with the awe of surprise. Even if one
“trusts” the spirits will show up—and a good medium always does—it is still a question of when
and how they will show up.

Emphasis is not so much on the enduring object of proof—though a sitter who has
received a drawing (now more commonly drawn by the Medium directly, but guided by spirits)
may treasure it as proof of a loved one’s appearance—but on the experience of witnessing
spiritual presence. The authentication of the presence of spirits is less about the indelibility of the
written word or the painted or drawn image, as on the unconscious or “automatic” guidance of
the spirit/author working through the Medium. That the image painted or the message written
should speak to the verifiable presence of the spirit, that is, to make the spirit recognizable, is the
aim. Authentication seems to take place in this triangulated relationship between Medium, sitter
and spirit, a relationship that binds words, images and otherwise spectral forms, to authentic
spiritual expressions.

1.5. On the Ephemerality of Spirit Mediation

By contrast to the Spiritualist emphasis visual evidences (even as these begin in the bodily
experience of spirit through the Medium), in Scriptural traditions the transcendence of the God is
mediated primarily through the written word, as God’s Word. And God’s Word is God’s
activity—what God says, is. God’s word is thus God’s essence, which is God’s existence:
theologically speaking God’s essence and existence are not separated, which is to say that God is existence, God is fully actualized at every moment. In this regard, scripture fixes the indelibility of the Word of God, to the story of God’s action in creation. In Genesis: “Let there by light,” and there was light. Or in the Koran: “when he decrees a thing, he says concerning it: Be and it is.” Webb Keane notes that this passage of the Koran is often used in text ingestion, that is, the words are swallowed, moving from “exterior to the interior of the body in order to manipulate relations between visible and invisible orders of reality” (Keane 2013, 9). Incarnation is similar, insofar as it realizes a corporealization of an incorporeal entity or power: God is in-carnated into the body of a man, Jesus, who is also the incarnation of God’s word—Jesus, the book of John tells us, is “the Word.” God’s Word is thus enfleshed in the incarnate body of Christ—“he sent his Word among us” (cf. John). And this incarnation is repeated when Christians ingest the Word, as Christ’s body and blood, during the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist.

While Spiritualist bodily mediation may take up the logic of incarnation, it does not secure God’s activity in scriptural revelation. “Spiritualists have no sectarian creed, articles of faith, or statement of belief excepting the trust as perceived by the individual,”” through the experience (both evidential and sensed) of spirit communication (Richmond 2002). The only text referred to amongst Spiritualist is the list of Spiritualist “Principles of Spiritualism.”” And, the most commonly practiced form of mediumship today, “mental” mediumship, is the giving of messages verbally to a sitter or an audience. Here, I want to say, the language of spiritual revelation is mediated through the momentary but repeatable experience of the body, through the iconicity of the body itself—not to represent but to enflesh or incarnate a communicable presence of invisible spirits. As if to drive home the centrality of the fleshly medium and the ephemerality of the message, we have the example of “uneducated” Mary Comstock, “who used
her body as a slate for spirit messages, which appeared as ‘red lines coruscated’ upon her flesh, that disappeared as quickly as they were inscribed” (Cox 2003, intro). In other “physical” manifestations such as ethereal ectoplasmic forms, the emphasis again is not on the stability and persistent efficacy of the materialized object, which disappears as immediately as it emerges, but on the momentary evidence it provides of the spirits for the living. Scripture, by contrast, provides a comparatively stable mediation of God’s presence through God’s word, an actualization of God’s power in us and through us, that is built, less upon the momentary appearance of the divine (however repeated), and more on various ways of interpreting and inscribing Gods’ word into ritual, thought and deed. This is not to ignore the many “enthusiasms” and mystical practices that belong to religions of the Book precisely understand revelations are occurring here and now, that is, as bodily experience, but to focus on the fundamental stabilization of scripture, even as it is in continuous tension with the role of the body and the more fleeting nature of “religious experiences” within its traditions. Bearing in mind the embodied, enthusiastic forms of Protestantism to which Spiritualist practice stands in closer relation, Spiritualists do not, as in scriptural traditions, privilege the written word over the spoken utterance.

When scriptural text takes on more magical functions and is treated as a material object, as Keane shows of “spirit writing,” the emphasis remains on the stabilization of meaning: “treating writing as a physical object, the amulet stabilizes divine language that markedly contrasts to the evanescence of the speech act” (Keane 2013, 8). In cases of automatic writing or drawing, where the Medium’s hand is guided by the spirit authorizing the text, even in cases where the spirit writes directly onto a tablet without the hand of the Medium, the spirits words are likewise stabilized through their materialization as text or image. And yet, while the object
(the slate, or drawing) is treated as evidence of spirit communication, it is not so much the stabilization of the content communicated that matters, but, I want to say, the fact of communication as such.

The ephermality of the message is reiterated by the Medium’s claim to “forget” the message after it is spoken, especially in cases of trance or automatic writing where it is not the Medium, but the spirit who is speaking—and this flow of words messages cannot be remembered by the Medium, nor scarcely by the sitter. Individual “readings,” in which the Medium simply speaks what she receives instantly “from spirit,” are often recorded so that the sitter has a material record and can listen to the message at a later time. I can only attest to this sense of an enveloping fog of amnesia, throughout my fieldwork both in practicing mediumship and listening to messages.

If there is a point of stability in mediumship, is seems to fall, not on any externalized object or text, but on the experience of the medium and the sitter. The sitter receives “information” from the Medium that must be verified or denied: what is communicated can only be verified insofar as it strikes an emotional chord, and forms an affective association with the sitter. The arrangement and choice of words the Medium uses in “painting the dead back to life,” is thus never understood as accidental to the message itself. More convincing still is when the Medium can utter an expression the dead person themselves may have used while living, ventriloquizing their way of talking. While the message matters to the sitter, it is not the indelibility of a message itself, I would argue, but the fact of recognition that communication with the spirit is felt to have taken place. A moment of recognition must take place. A particular phrase might form an association with the way the sitter remembered or thought about the dead person in an unconscious resonance of forgotten phrases and images, like Benjamin’s “flash” of
recognition, drawing past and the present together in the “constellation” of an instant illuminating the mystery of the present as presence—the Now of meaning.

If, as Kittler says, “all books are books of the dead,” and to follow the apostle Paul’s call to exchange the dead letter of the Law—“the letter kills”—for the living Word of God—“the spirit gives life” (2 Cor:3-6)—the Spiritualists, I am saying, exchanged history and scripture, the permanence of the written tradition, for religion “in the broadest possible interpretation […] as having their primal basis in inspiration,” built upon a form of communication which values automaticity and immediacy (Richmond 2002, 3)\(^{10}\). As Courtney Bender points out in her work on contemporary “metaphysical” practitioners in Cambridge, the search for an authentic, and universalizable grounding for a modern concept of “religion” was sought in a generalizable religious “experience”; the Spiritualists reflect this modern desire to ground religious difference in some prior and “primal […] inspiration” (Bender 2010, intro). As mentioned earlier, the body thereby displaces the authority of text, becoming the verifying ground of scriptural truth, not the other way around. Moreso, the practice of Mediumship itself continuously inverts any stability, by making inert images move, animate, and flow, while emphasizing the impermanence of language by focusing on the momentariness of the message—what endures is not what was said, so much as the sense and feeling that the words create in “painting the dead back to life.” And this must be coupled with the fact that Medium’s do not share their biographies with one another very freely—it often felt to me, in talking and training with other Mediums, that biography was

\(^{10}\) This text, entitled the “Presentation of Spiritualism: Spiritualism defined from the Spirit World,” is a transcription of the “direct Spirit communication” of the guides of Cora V. Richmond, who spoke under trance to the Spiritualist gathering by the name of the “first World’s Parliament of Religions” in Chicago in October 1893. As such, the text, outlining the various “aspects” of Spiritualism as a religion—the philosophical, phenomenal, religious etc.—is a performance of the priority of spirit experience as the basis and authorization of text, which I am here addressing.
simply suspended, held apart and accorded less reality than the more “real” experience of all things spiritual.

1.6. The Body as Image: Iconoclasm and the Mediation of the Body

While Spiritualism may be counted among the metaphysical religions, a stream of “American spiritual pluralism existing from colonial days and before,” that falls outside of the America-as-Protestant-Nation narrative, and names a continuous mixing in American society of Christian elements with its heretical outsides, including radical mysticisms, New Age-isms, Native American pluralism and European occult traditions, it must also be situated, I am arguing, at the edges of modern Protestant enthusiastic traditions.

I situate Spiritualism within a larger Protestant, iconoclastic inheritance in part because Spiritualists draw their own genealogies to movements at the edges of Protestantism, where an inner visionary experience is pronounced while outer images are banned. But also, I want to say, because modern Spiritualism, locates its center in the practice of bodily Mediumship, thus pushing at the iconoclastic tension regarding the limits of sensation and the experience of the spirit, and the emphasis on discernment of what images, bodies and things, are animate or inanimate, living or dead.

Reformation iconoclasm makes a distinction between “living” and “dead” images, where the body itself is often upheld as a “living” image of God, against the “dead” images of relics, icons, statues and other ritual externals. Calvin thus warns of the power of the “dead” image to entrance: “For the shape of the idol’s bodily members makes, and in a sense compels, the mind

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dwelling in a body to suppose that the idols’ body too has feeling, because it looks very like its own body.”\(^\text{12}\)

What goes unnoticed, I want to say, in the bodily mediation named Spiritualist mediumship is a hidden *iconoclastic mediation*. By this I mean, the way that the body itself becomes an imagistic figure within a radically Protestant iconoclastic imaginary, as in Puritan thought, and the only authorial place of images. This however, makes the body and its “right use,” a problem. As such iconoclasm is a problem of the body, and one that takes up the ancient division between image and matter, which becomes a question of discernment between true images and false images. And here, in Spiritualist mediumship, is reflected in the discernment between true/living *spirits* and the false/dead images of *imagination* and memory. This division between true and false images, as much as true and false bodies, is itself situated within the genealogy dividing the *many*, non-Christian and so-called *animate* “traditions,” from the *One* true “religion” of Christianity.

And as a modern movement, Spiritualism blurs the lines between dead and living images, inanimate and animate bodies, drawing together the worship of ancestor spirits in traditional practices with the problem of discernment which Christianity enacts, in subtracting itself from a general background of territorialized spirits and making religion a problem of “right belief.”\(^\text{13}\) It is as if a problem named by iconoclasm—the tensed distinction between what can and should be revealed of the divine, the spiritual, the godly, and what can be known through sensory and perceptual experience—is in mediumship played out *in the body* itself, as the physical container of spiritual images. The Medium is a figure of mediation, and Spiritualism centers religious mediation upon the body. As a figure of modernity, the Spiritualist medium confronts a modern

\(^{12}\) Kibbey, 47.

\(^{13}\) Barber, 164.
opposition; not only the binary between mind and body, but a primary division enacted by Christianity and its transmutation within the secular—namely, the iconoclastic sharpening of the “the distinction between spirit and that which can be manifested to the senses.”

I’m proposing that Spiritualism articulates a Protestant iconoclastic tension, wherein images are not externalized in any durable way, but occupy an inner space of spiritual and visionary experience mediated through the body—itsel itself become a kind of image, as well as a container of spirit-images. It is as if the banning of external images, with its condition in a de-animation of matter, at the same time, animates or perhaps re-animates, the body in new ways. In a multiplication of images, the many spirits appear, not as stabilized icons or otherwise religious “art,” but as an inner experience of the body that must be translated to an outer world. While the spirits are pushed inward the body itself becomes a cleared space, like the black cabinet, in which spiritual affects are intensified and formed as spirits.

In mediumship, the body mediates the sensory experience of supersensory spirits—particularly, though not exclusively, as images—images in the body. Mediumship makes of the body a space for images to appear, and thus becomes a kind of aberrant icon which, instead of stabilizing the relation between creator and creation—as does the Word of God embodied in the icon that is Christ, as in Scripture—gives rise to an excess of ephemeral images, utterances, words, shapes and other signs of the multitudinous spirits. As Keane put it, iconoclasm is always tied to a concept of divine transcendence (Keane 2013).

If Spiritualism immane


15 Stolow articulates this translation, with regard especially to physical mediumship, as the performative translation of the “invisibility and intangibility of spirit world into recognizable a gestural codes” that can “sustain the bonds of trust with her audience” (Stolow 2008, 684).
through a modernist technology—as played out and pushed to its limits in bodily experience. As such, mediumship, both literally embodies, and pushes against, the iconoclastic division between sensation and revelation, by making the bodily sensorium the medium of discernment of what belongs to the spirit and what of the flesh, what is sacred and what is profane. I want to say that in the materialization of spiritual communication, in the form of ephemeral “messages,” but even as durable “physical” manifestations, like spirit portraits, or spirit writings—such spirit expressions refer back, always and in the first instance, to the sensing body as the icon par excellence. In other words, it is not the image that holds the spirit, but the body, and the body is itself the locus wherein sensation and spirit are bridged.

The Body as “Dynamic Material Shape”

And he saw shapes of evil/ In the physical, moral, and spiritual world/ And in himself

——The Qur’an, Sura 3

Protestant Iconoclasm arises not out of a lack of belief in the power of images and their capacity to enchant and captivate, but on the contrary, particularly for the Puritans, in their belief in the iconicity of the body itself (Kibbey 1986, 42-64). Although images “do not speak, or see, or hear, or walk,” they can seem capable of these acts because “they have mouth, eyes, ears, feet” and thus “seem to live and breathe,” warns Calvin (Kibbey 1986, 47). The danger lies not only in the fact that iconic images resemble animate bodies, as Calvin points out, thus deceptively competing with the iconicity of the “living” body; rather, I am suggesting, the underlying threat lies in the Puritan understanding of the malleability of the body itself, as plastic shape or figura. Reformation iconoclasm makes a distinction between “living” and “dead” images, where the
body itself is often upheld as a “living” image of God, against the “dead” images of relics, icons, statues and other ritual externals. Calvin thus warns of the power of the “dead” image to entrance: “For the shape of the idol’s bodily members makes, and in a sense compels, the mind dwelling in a body to suppose that the idols’ body too has feeling, because it looks very like its own body” (1986, 47). The danger of the image here seems to be that it not only that it entrances the body to ecstatically externalize itself and enter into image, but that it mistakes those images for animate bodies. Does this mistake belie another danger? As the other side of the danger of mistaking an image for a body, does one also mistake bodies for images?

This seems to be Kibbey’s point, when drawing on the classical concept of figura within Puritan thought, she argues words, bodies and things, were all respectively understood as “dynamic material Shape[s]” (1986, 3). Figura transcends the binary of literal and figural, in that all signs compose material Shapes. The body exceeds the boundaries of the fleshly body—or flesh is here already spectralized, doubled by its Shape. The body as Shape is a gestural figure, in which signs are congealed. Because the body is always already an image—or more precisely, an iconic Shape of Christ’s body, the One true Image—there is a metonymic relation between bodies and images. Iconoclastic fervor reveals the vulnerability of this Shape, as the flip-side of the belief in the iconicity of the body: it is always at risk of falling, of becoming an idolatrous shape. What a body does, particularly its gestural-language, matters. The “right use” of the body meant performing sacramental gestures that mark the body as an image of God: an act of non-violent iconoclasm was to refuse to “kneel” at the Lords Supper (as a refusal to imitate the idolatrous sacramental gestures of the Anglican Church). “Iconoclasm was not just about the ‘right use of objects,’ but the ‘right use of people’,” says Kibbey, and I would add, the right use of the powers of the body (1986, 43).
The seemingly accidental effect of the Puritan concept of *figura* is to allow for a slippage of the body between image/Shape and matter, made possible by a plastic conception of matter as such. The body, possessed of a second-body or a quasi-sensory extension, is thus also a *Shape*—both matter and image, spectral and “real.” This doubleness of the body is its potentiality and its threat. The potential threat of *shape*-shifting from “living icon” to aberrant “dead image” or idol, makes the body a source of anxiety and doubt. Moreover because gesture plays such an important role—a sacramental language of gesture composes the “right” *Shape* or “living image” (icon) of the body—aberrant gestures (including spiritual or psychological afflictions, but also the gestures of “heathen” bodies) produce a theatrical inversion of the “right” *Shape* of the body.

If the body is an image or Shape, then not only are images dangerous, but bodies as well; it is the body that risks becoming a *Shape of the devil*, an idolatrous or demonic Shape, and this is what the Puritans called Indians—“Shapes of the devil” (Kibbey 1986, 92-120). In thus killing Indians during the Pequot war, a war fought by the Puritans against the Pequot beginning in 1636 and culminating in the massacre of Pequot men, women and children, they were not only killing Indians but the spectral Shape of the Indian (1986, 92-120). As Kibbey argues, however, this “first major war between Puritans and Native Americans” happened to coincide with the antinomian controversy, which focused upon the “heretical” ideas of Anne Hutchinson, the “American Jezebel,” who was banished for her claims to a direct, and thus unmediated, *experience* of God, a result which “did much to make “women” a symbolic category of threat to Puritan authority (1986, 92, 107). Kibbey connects the Puritan sense of women as dangerous Shapes, to the massacre of the Pequot, and the especially “gratuitous slaughter of Pequot women, “ as “deliberately perpetrated and carefully recorded by” leaders of the massacre (1986, 93;
Here, “the recipients of iconoclastic violence were not merely symbolic objects, statues or paintings representing people, but real people who had become for the Puritans the living images of opposition to the New England Puritan living images of grace” (Kibbey 1986, 102). The figural violence enacted against the Pequot was rooted in the interchangability of figural and literal meanings—if Puritan men were “living icons,” other bodies were problematic images, fallen images that could justifiably be destroyed, as “the unconverted” would finally be destroyed in the apocalypse in any case (Kibbey 1986, 99). This according to Kibbey, brought an especial actual violence against the Pequot at Mystic, who were burned alive—“WE MUST BURN THEM,” Captain Mason said (1986, 97). The bodies burned were to Puritan eyes millennial Shapes of the devil, of the heathen Shape who should suffer a literal burning, reflecting the figural language of apocalyptic or “millennial conflagration […],” an apocalyptic action was thus “literaly enacted against the Pequot at Mystic in an “externall” burning deliberately initiated by the Puritan militia” against a figural Shape (Kibbey 1986, 97).

Interestingly the end to this slippage between figural and literal, both as regards bodies and words, was thought to come only with the “apocalypse” which promised an end to this plasticity in language and bodily image, and “the certitude of signification […] a language of pure literal meaning” (Kibbey 1986, 97).

The Danger of Shapes

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16 Jennings shows Captain John Underhill’s drawing of the attack on the Pequot fort at Mystic in 1637, noting that the picture shows that “no Pequot or other Indian is show with firearms,” and “Englishment are shown shooting down unarmed Indians as well as those armed with bows and arrows. In a sensuous affinity, however, Kibbey notes that this drawing, a circle with various labia-shaped folds in the center, is markedly vaginal in shape, marking the massacre as an event fusing “sexuality and violence” and further emphasizing her sense that the threat of women, like Hutchison, and the violence against “Indians” during the Pequot Wars, relied on their interchangeability as actual bodies and figural Shapes (Jennings 1976, 224; Kibbey 1986, 110).
The problem with idols, I am saying, at least within Puritan thought, is not only that they deceive, but that they sympathetically, and thus affectively, draw out the spectrality of the body itself—they encourage spectral alliances between humans and non-humans, the living and the dead. Quoting Augustine, Calvin warns of the power of the “dead” image to entrance: “For the shape of the idol’s bodily members makes, and in a sense compels, the mind dwelling in a body to suppose that the idols’ body too has feeling, because it looks very like its own body” (Kibbey 1986, 47). There is a dangerous confusion here between the “living” body and the “dead” image: confusion between what body “has feeling” and what body does not. It is as if the spectral or “dead” image, entices the living body to feel its way, extending its own sensorium, into something external, even inanimate that does not feel. Such a mistake, animates the “dead” image (idol) while presumably de-animating the living image, robbing it of spiritual life, which can only be had by extending oneself into an image capable of receiving it—the image of God.

The danger of images is that the body will be sensorially captured by them—extending itself into images that fascinate, the body becomes alienated from itself; a familiar fear given contemporary anxieties around the body’s technological extension in machines that at once capture and ‘reproduce’ the sensorium. If the body as living icon, in Protestant thought, is always already the locus of its own spectral Shape or figure, the body is double. In this sense, the body encounters itself as foreign to itself: as if “the body is felt under the body” (Deleuze 2003, 126). Deleuze is speaking of a sensory body felt beneath or within our own body, what he calls the Body Without Organs (BWO). The interchangeability between the body and its image or spectral Shape (a form of sensory extension) means the body exceeds itself, it at once inside and outside of itself—ambiguously real and not real, material and immaterial, concrete and abstract at once. Within this understanding of the body as always doubled by a spectral Shape, the body is at risk
of losing itself by finding itself in an external image, as feared by Calvin and the iconoclasts—making the body a source of anxiety and doubt. This spectral doubt around the body is carried into fears around the automaticity of the body—as mesmerism, somnambulism and finally Spiritualism draws out—where the body refuses to behave, according to its own reason even, as it responds to invisible forces affecting it.

1.7. Mediumizing the body: Icon and Fetish

The body is a living icon in Puritan thought, as the place of the image, Shape or spectre. In modern mediumship, there is an acknowledgement of this figural spectrality of the body, or bodily extension—often called the etheric body (Findlay 2000). This is the body that extends itself toward the spirits. Or, it is through the self-conscious instrumentalization of the actual body, that one intensifies the experience of this ethereal body. That is, the Medium treats her body as an object of attention—as we shall see in her mediumistic practices. Does this not make the body a kind of fetish, in which affects animating a bodily inside, are made the object of attention—the body itself thereby made object, mediating and containing the outside of unknown spirits?

“The fetish is, then, first of all” says William Pietz, “something intensely personal, whose truth is experienced as a substantial movement from “inside” the self (the self as totalized through an impassioned body, a “body without organs”) into the self-limited morphology of a material object situated in space “outside” itself [italics mine]” (Pietz 1985). The fetish appears in Pietz’ study, as the site of repetition carrying with it the affecting trace of a “unique originating event” that brought together, in a moment, “heterogeneous elements into a novel identity.” That “identity,” is an embodied one, it cannot be thought apart from the body (whether
human or nonhuman) in which it happens and is congealed. And this moment of concretion, which is called the *fetish*, is the concretion of a something “experienced,” of a “substantial movement inside the self” [...] “through an impassioned body,” as Pietz refers to it in the above quote. How does something experienced inside the self become an object outside the self? We must ask, following Pietz here, how the BWO, as an immaterial second-body of sensation and affection is connected to the fetish, as that discrete externalized material object, “outside”? As I will pursue in Part III, there is a question here of how the body mediates forces and externalizes sensations, and thus behaves as a technical extension in its own right.

The Medium reveals the body not only to be the site of affection and intension, but an instrument capable of mediatically containing—making endure—images and sensations. In being affected by spirits, experienced clairvoyantly for the most part, that is, as images, the Medium uses her body as an instrument to attend and attune to these sensations. This begins the difficult task of discerning what is a spirit and what is not. Here, wherein the body becomes an instrument of sensation, itself objectified as an inner container in which sensory images can be observed and discerned, the body functions much like the fetish. More precisely, I am saying the body in Mediumship may be regarded as shifting between two different figures and functions, between that of icon and that of fetish.

Because the body is affected by images and sensations that seem to come from the outside, the body acts as icon, becoming the Shape (to use Kibbey’s term) or form resembling some “immaterial model or entity.” (Pietz) In other words, here the emphasis is on the body as an abstract figure, a bodily image. The icon is defined first and foremost, theologically, as an *imago dei*—that is, an image analogically reflective of God’s divinity, even as it does not share in God’s substance. Thus the idol, says Pietz, as the fallen and deceptive underside of iconicity,
names above all, a problematic relation of “iconic resemblance to some immaterial model or entity,” and thus is an image of the relation/mediation of G/gods, spirits and demons. Pietz emphasizes the fact that icons/idols refer first and foremost to a relation between image and divinity, and not to the material embodiment of divinity. This is clear if we recall the theological account of the icon: the icon marks the difference between image and substance, and is not itself part of the substance that it represents (i.e. God) (Evdomikov 1990).

But the Medium’s body is not just an image reflecting other images (nor a just image), but a body objectified as a material instrument in which images are contained and intensified. The Medium in this sense, as material instrument, makes the body itself a fetish, the emphasis being not on the body as an iconic image or Shape, but on the body as objectified material medium capable of containing and communicating immaterial images. The fetish, after all, is defined by this “irreducible materiality,” and the “truth of the fetish” lies in its “status as material embodiment” (Pietz 1985). Including the fetish in the Geistes Geschichte of Western Philosophy, Pietz refers to the fetish as “untranscended materiality”: “for Hegel, the African culture of the fetish represented a moment just prior to History, since the fetish was precisely that object of the Spirit that failed to participate in the Idea […] (1985).

Further consider the dialectics in the etymology of fetish, from the Latin adjective “facticius or factitius” formed from the verb facere which means “to make,” as first having the innocuous meaning of simply “man-made” things, but later connects “making” to “artifice” in its negative connotation, as “material made by human effort in order to deceive” (Pietz 1987, 24). Fetish carrying the connotation of things-made as deceptive. This dialectics of making and deceiving was picked up by Christian theologians in their writings on the nature of idolatry, bringing us back to the similarity in difference between idols and fetishes; here the idol contains
the nascent idea of fetish—as factitius thing made in order to deceive—within it. “As ‘images’ they were mere external forms, likenesses, lacking essential truth and inner spirituality. As facticii they were purposefully altered material bodies” (Pietz 1987, 27). The image realized in a material body ceases to be a “mere” copy of reality and becomes a thing made to deceive—Making it hard to trust images, let alone bodies. This brings us back to the undecidability between bodies and images described by Kibbey in the Puritan idea of the body as Shape, and the importance of the “right use” of sacramental objects as themselves productive of figures or Shapes (bodies in their own right). As Pietz says, “idols and all non-ecclesial sacramental objects were characterized as at once semblances and (“images”: simulacra) and manufactured facticii.” Thus the idol contains both the idea of an innocuous semblance, the image as “mere” representation, as well as the image as “facticii”—a material body intentionally altered in order to “deceive” (Pietz 1987).

Here, I want to say, in mediumship the body veers between icon and fetish. I say fetish and not idol, because it seems to me that the idea of the fetish at least gets at the obdurate material and embodied aspect of mediumship, which is so often overlooked in its more cognitive treatment. The practice of mediumship thus pivots between the problem of images as potential “idols” and the problem of bodies as potential “fetishes.” The fetish as the fixing or “fixation” of an affective event into a material form, to return to Pietz’ opening quote, resonates with the way the “flow” of images, within the Medium must be “fixed” in a space within the body, concretized in a material frame, so as to become discernable as spirits.

What is perhaps most mysterious about the fetish, as Pietz defines it, is its “active relation” to the “living body of an individual,” where the fetish object, even though it is not the body itself, becomes an external second-body (my term) to the living body: “a kind of external
controlling organ directed by powers outside the affected person’s will,” and this subverts “the ideal of the autonomously determined self” (Pietz 1987, 23). The authorizing self is here displaced by this second-body, as autonomous spectral extension—what I have called in relation to Puritan thought, the Shape of the body—which can be related back to the discourse of “automaticity” within Spiritualist conceptions of the body. Of course, when the Medium makes the body her instrument, this second-body is not externalized but internalized—brought into a demarcated space within the body itself. The body thus becomes a fetish unto itself, the moment this automatic body becomes visible as a separate, extendable body within or underneath the actual body. The moment the body is self-consciously, that is intentionally, made into an object of sensory attention, I want to say, is the moment when the body becomes a source of doubt—and this is the self-same moment when the body, treated as an object, becomes a fetish, the fetish uniting the idea that “things made,” are tools of deception.

Mediumship, it seems to me, aims precisely take control of this “automatic” body, by consciously treating one’s body like an instrument through which automatic images and sensations, as “flows” can flow. What is here referred to as the automaticity of the body, and what I’m also calling the spectrality of the body as Shape, makes the body an object of suspicion and doubt, and such bodies of doubt are often coded as feminine bodies.

Within the context of modern Spiritualist Mediumship as a largely feminine centered practice, one that played a central role in promoting and provoking the suffragist movement in North America, it seems relevant, in thinking mediumship as a mediation of the body—that fetish, in its originary usage in the “late middle ages” from the Portuguese word feitico, designated “‘magical practice’ or ‘witchcraft’” concerning “in its earliest discourse […] the “control of female sexuality” (Pietz, 1985, 6). As such, thinking through the mediumistic body in
relation to the genealogy of the fetish, highlights a politics of the “feminine” body in its
ambivalent objectification as both powerful object and controlled subject. For instance, the way
both mediumship and the discourse of fetishism concern the problem of bodily mediation as the
site in which “heterogeneous elements,” at once material and immaterial, are congealed into
objects of attention, reveals the anxiety around the undecidability around the limits of bodies as
such, and feminine bodies in particular. Mediumship in this sense concerns the way particular
bodies—bodies that make visible this second, spectral and automatic body, a body beset by
heterogeneous forces—mediate both the normative designations of “social value,” as well as
what is masked and overcoded, in short, what exceeds such codes of value.

As encounter with an outside, the fetish is the concretion of a potent site of encounter
between different or “heterogeneous elements” through which a transvaluation and translation
between “radically different social systems” occurs (Pietz 1985, 7). Pietz is here referring to the
“intercultural space’ of the West African coast as a colonial encounter between Portuguese,
Protestant and West African cultural ideas and practices—but also as connected to the “emergent
articulation of the ideology of the commodity form” as a problem of the translation of values
economic and social (1985, 7). The fetish is here an encounter with an outside of what the
European believes the other believes—and this, congealed in a material object. I wish only to
emphasize, following Latour, that there is in the very term fetish, a distance named that alienates
the object and places doubt upon it—as something we like to think others (naively) believe in
(Latour 1998). The charge of fetishism, in being reduced by the iconoclast to a matter of
“belief,” hides the fact that what is fetishized acts as a mediating vehicle of the body itself much
in the same way that faciality understood as an abstract code (Deleuze, Guattari 1987), hides the
mediation of the body. The fetish, however, is not a matter of projected beliefs, but of bodily
extension, of something emergent from inside the “impassioned body,” and emergent “outside” in material form.

If, as I'm saying, the Medium treats her body like a fetish, an object in which the event of an encounter with an “outside” now “inside” becomes real and material, this occurs somehow through the moment of objectification, where the body is treated as an “instrument” for discerning of spirits—through which spirits can be identified in the first place. And this takes us back to William’s transfiguration, whereby the Medium’s body becomes a fetish for the appearance of a generalized “Indian,” a mask making visible another mask, yet revealing something else: not the reality of an encounter with “Indians,” but the bodies propensity for masking—for spectralizing itself. Doesn’t the fetish precisely reveal a concretization of hidden “values”—as both actual and virtual histories, affects, and words—materialized in some form? It is as if, in the moment of taking on the face of the generalized “Indian,” William’s face faces the many masks of history, effaced only to be masked again by the repeated gesture of nation-making, articulating the truth in fiction of virtual encounters.

It seems to me in the very practice of objectifying the body as an “instrument” of sensation, the Medium addresses herself to the problem of the modern body specifically and intentionally, as embodying a paradoxical tension between objectification and intimacy, doubt and belief. This doubling of the body as a reflective space of images (icon), and an objectified container (fetish), makes modern mediumship a site through which to revisit the relationship between images and bodies, as a problem of bodily mediation.

1.8. How to Dead-end the Image: Calvin and the Image without History

If certain images are dangerous according to Calvin, in that they draw a body out of itself and
into a sensory identification with a false, idolatrous, image, how is one to guard against such an erotics of the image? The image lures us, but not all images have the power to equally call us forth, turning our bodies inside-out, as it were. For Calvin, one safeguard against the power of certain images to entrance, to make of themselves false “idols” of the body, is to properly historicize the bodily image. Calvin opposes, says Kibbey, “images and forms of bodies without any depiction of past events.” To make an image safe from falling into idolatry, “the artist must represent the context, the limited temporality of his images, depicting figures engaged in “events” whose historicity, whose pastness is recognizable (italics mine)” (Kibbey 1986, 46). The safe image is one sequestered to pastness: one that is effectively de-animated and rendered dead through its enclosure within a proper historical context.

A properly historicized image is a dead image: “they convey the idea that the artist is a mere copyist of living icons and because historicized figures are safely “dead” in their depiction and thus distinguishable from the living […]” (Kibbey 1986, 46). The figure must be a realistic copy, and must be place-able within the ever receding line of history. Of course this implies that representing anything outside of history gives it a strange power to draw the body or Shape out of itself and into the copy. And here we enter the territory of the spectral Indian, who appeared upon William’s face – is this face as clichéd, generalizable, and essentially, the “recognizable” Indian, not itself outside and inside history at once: outside of history as a now dead but living spectre, a pastness that, because sequestered to the past, can return? And inside of history as the very spirit of North American history, as the sublation of the Indian into a generalizable ‘idea,’ put to work on behalf of settlement?

Like Calvin’s conception of the materiality of the Eucharistic bread as mere “empty token” or fetish of God, the historicized image is “dead” and devoid of spirit in the same way. This
delimitation of the image to its place in history is also the delimitation of perception as such: “because the deity cannot be envisioned by the human imagination.” But isn’t the problem that people do envision the deity all the time, imagining and thus making images of the divine? Calvin seems to be saying that true perception concerns only what has been *a priori* sequestered to the material world, as much as to history: “only those things are to be sculptured or painted which the eyes are capable of seeing: let not God’s majesty, which is far above the perception of the eyes, be debased through unseemly representations” (Kibbey 1986, 112). This realism is a realism devoid of imagination—or at least it requires a constant vigilance against the deceptions of imagination, as productive of images not grounded in material reality. The seemingly accidental effect of the Puritan concept of *figura* is to allow for a slippage of the body between image/Spectre/Shape and matter, made possible by a plastic conception of matter as such. This, of course, as Kibbey points out, makes some bodies—those of women and Native Americans—particularly threatening to the Puritan mind, because they represent the constant danger of this slippage from “living icon” into aberrant Shape.

If historicizing the image, placing it in a past that denudes it of present liveliness, what can be said of our modern history, as exemplified in 19th century anthropology with its tendency to place non-western peoples on the other side of “reason”: on the one hand, the romanticism of the “primitive” in a before *outside* of history, or, on the other hand, the “primitive” as an atavistic remainder *inside of history*, who can only “survive” histories relentless progression as regressive inversions. In locating indigenous peoples before or outside of history, according to the logics of Calvin’s take on images, the image remains animate and thus dangerous, perhaps accounting for the wildly schizophrenic oscillation in U.S. history between “playing” Indian and killing Indians. In locating indigenous peoples as “survivals,” to use E.B. Tylor’s term, inside of histories
onward march, they are safely placed within history, and thus sequestered to *the past* while inhabiting the present. Whether actually killed, or reduced to “dead” images, the bodies of Native Americans are converted to spectral images, held captive to a historical narrative not their own. My point here, following the logic of this iconoclastic Shapes, is that here, all bodies are also images—not only the Puritan bodies, or conversely, “Indian” bodies, as discussed by Kibbey and which I will discuss further in Part. II. The iconoclastic history of images in the Protestant West thus carries in it an ontological claim as to what images should live and die.

Chakrabarty addresses this deadening effect of historicism when he speaks of the magical “conversion” of the participant—in ethnographies participant-observation—to an observer, or “witness.” As witness the ethnographer plays the observers part in participant-observation, a part that has its condition in an always prior *historicist* conversion of “something that is contemporaneous with us—ranging from practices, humans, institution, and stone-inscriptions to documents” to “a relic of another time or place”17 (Chakrabarty 2000, 238). The participant-observation of the ethnographer involves the “conversion of the participant’s involved and engaged eye into the distant and disinterested eye of the observer,” and is synonymous with the way that something encountered in the present is converted to history as “‘bit’ of the past”: “a particular past thus becomes objectified in the observer’s time.” Inhabiting the disinterested eye of the observer, what “continues to have effects on the present,” can be recognized at a *safe distance*, as an “effect of the past” on the present. In allying itself to reason, historicism overdraws “the boundary between the modern and pre-modern,” because the projective discourse of “reason”—there is always a future telos toward which one is shaping the present—denudes the present “now” of its plurality (2000, 238). The plurality he refers to concerns all that is

17
relegated to the other side of reason, to a pastness without futurity: all that is “superstitious, religious etc.” and “traditional.”

It seems to me what Chakrabarty so insightfully portrays is a strange process of conversion of presence to pastness, whereby what is encountered in the “plurality” of the present—what I have referred to as the “many” of Christian discourse, but Chakrabarty refers to as the “plural” of a polytheistic reality—is sequestered to the past, becoming moreover, a divisible, parcelizable, object of the past. The stream of the many, or what he calls the plural, that constitutes the present is thereby subtracted from the present, or rather denuded of its full force as present-presence, to a safely distanced object that can be archived and studied. And Chakrabarty admits that such a distancing, as required of the anthropologist, is fruitful—that the play of proximity and distance, I would add, is itself a part of writing, as it is of mediumship, insofar as such a distancing is dialectically present in mediumistic practice itself, in making, as I have said, the body an object of sensation. Chakrabarty’s critique is directed at the historicization of images as a totalizing discourse, a discourse which concerns the way plural temporalities and thus forms of life, are denuded of their force in the present; but it also concerns the role of distance in anthropology, as denuding the full force of the anthropological present as an encounter, with temporalities that refuse a certain form of objectification.

I wish to draw attention here to the tensed movement in participant-observation between “being affect-ed” in the field, in the sense Favvret Saada discusses concerning witchcraft in the rural Bocage of North-West France, and the problem of observing or “witnessing,” to follow Chakrabarty, which involves the conversion of this space of being affected a distanced view whereby what was present becomes an object or “bit” of the past (Favret-Saada 2012). This oxymoron, participant-observation, “being outside while imagining oneself completely inside,”
hides the problem of “being affected,” as Favret-Saada puts it, in her exploration of the importance of affect as opened by her experience of “dewitching,” alongside her own psychoanalytic therapy (Favret-Saada 2012). Wishing to escape the dual limits placed on affect by Anglo-American ideas of affect as purely “social construction,” on the one hand, and the French ethnographic and psychoanalytic condemnation of “affect to irrelevancy by forcing it into the realm of representation,” on the other, Favret-Saada explores her own being affected in the field which opened what she calls a method of making “participation an instrument of knowledge.” What does this mean? “I let myself be affected,” she says, “without seeking to study what they were doing, nor even to understand and remember it.” This strikes me as particularly important in thinking about the experience of mediumship in its dealing with animate images, and the absence of history, or even memory for that matter. Where, for the anthropologist, there is a heightened sense of forgetting precisely insofar as one lets oneself be affected—and in mediumship, this being affected means entering the fog of altered states, allowing oneself to be carried away by clouds of spirits, while hoping to find one’s way back to thinking and writing about one’s experiences after the fact. And yet, in the context of witchcraft as Favret-Saada says, such writing can be difficult, committing to writing up “a sort of chronicle of these enigmatic events,” though admittedly finding herself at times “incapable of a posteriori note taking” (2012, 440). And from my experience it seems the analogy she makes to psychoanalytic treatment holds, for it struck me that practicing mediumship feels a lot like lying on the couch, where it is also a case of affects rising to the surface within a demarcated space—and before these are handed back to you as representations, they are not easily chronicled, or even remembered. Of importance, is the way that anthropology, according to Favret-Saada, has failed to admit “the existence of rural witchcraft in Europe,” or in modern life as such, “coupled
with reflections on the distance that “we” are meant to maintain with witchcraft.” The same
could be said of the idea of “modern” mediumship (which I will return to in Part 4), which in any
case, like witchcraft, is placed outside “our immediate experience,” as something concerning
things that “escape our understanding.” But this approach to witchcraft, and by extension, I am
saying, mediumship, involves a distance that is troubled by the “letting herself be affected” as
quasi-method discussed by Favret-Saada where “participation” becomes “an instrument,” much
like the body itself, in mediumship (2012, 439). All this is to say that anthropology as
participant-observation seems to involve trying not to fall off the balance beam on either side: a
being affected, which not only transforms one’s intensions as a researcher, hopefully opening us
onto the worlds of others, but also awakens us to the liveliness of images, images we must keep
afloat as affecting animacies (the trick of writing?) while at the same time situating and
abstracting them in order to make them into more enduring forms.

In this regard, Spiritualism troubles the separation between here and there: as modern,
western and mostly ‘white,’ but also because Spiritualists inhabit the problematic prejudices of
modernity as uncomfortably “religious,” skirting the secular-religious divide, and adopting the
very stance of the scientific observer with regard to their own bodily sensorium. The body
becomes an object of observation, and simultaneously, the site of an intimate participation in
one’s own affective experience. At the same time, mediumship, I want to say, involves the
practiced bodily technique of refusing to put images to rest, at least as properly historicized and
situated pasts. The past remains present as a living presence that can be sensed, but also become
the place of an interruptive communication. At the same time, the conversion of images of the
dead—particularly when those dead are the bodies of the settler’s imagination of the Indian—
forces us to think how images are connected to bodies as present-tense animate realities.
If historicism involves a distancing we are comfortable with—and a way of writing we are comfortable with—and even, following a Marxian post-structuralist vein, makes for responsible, ideologically weary scholarship, mustn’t we also ask ourselves to what degree such writing emplaces ideas, peoples and images in a way that deadens them to the Now of the present—dulling us to the erotics of plural entanglements, not only of invisible affects and spirits, but all those “objects” of study that inhabit the present we share, yet are relegated to an elsewhere? And what is the relationship between critique and historicism, where critique, as Latour has pointed out, partakes in an iconoclastic project of de-fetishizing the ideologies of others, yet is itself embroiled in a fetishism that has reduced life worlds to “the beliefs we have that other people believe” (Latour 1998).

When our “objectifying relationship to the past” is our “only relationship” to the past, claims Chakrabarty, the return of the past becomes “a nightmare of the dead, as Marx put it” (2000, 252). The uncanny returns and hauntings of modern historical consciousness—not to mention the continuous secular shock of all that is “religiously motivated,” despite the obvious presence of religion in peoples lives, secular or not—are these not the haunting effects of having always already cut ourselves off from the plurality of the present, which we mistakenly call past? (Chakrabarty 2000, 249). Imagine the possible, asks Chakrabarty following Heidegger, not as that which is lacking, incomplete or unrealized of the present, but “that which already actually is but is present only as the ‘not yet’ of the actual.” This involves seeing the “now” as something “radically not-one and thus plural,” in which, in other words, difference is the present possible that always already “is” even if it is not-yet, within a given order, visible or sensible.

In this sense, Spiritualism addresses a specifically Protestant iconoclastic sense that bodies, not external images, are the true icons mediating the One, yet, in a de-conversion of
Protestantism, makes the body something like a profane icon, the displaced-place of the sacred many. I do not wish to make a genealogical argument about Spiritualism as a Protestant religion etc. nor to think Spiritualism as redemptive of modernity, but to think the ways in which North American settlement, beginning with the Puritans, involved iconoclastic ideas about space, image and body that illuminate what I call, in the context of mediumship, the spectrality of the body—the body doubled by a second-body, figure or shape making the body itself an image, mediating and thus reflecting, either God or the “many” spirits.

1.9. Postscript: On not preserving the past

Even with these more durable images of the spirits, that have withstood the offense of time, it always struck me as odd what little effort had been placed upon preserving not only the spirit paintings, but also the archival history of Spiritualist materials at Lily Dale. There is the Museum, which no independent researcher could make use of as there is nothing systematic about these materials other than what is organized in the head of Ron Nagy. Then there is the archive in the NSAC offices, where one is met by a general disarray of materials—innumerable spirit photographs stuffed into albums, books, magazines etc. which it seems are largely left untouched except by the occasional lonely researcher. History, it seems, like biography, takes a side-line when one is communicating daily with spirits.

It was there I met M., an elderly women who had appointed herself the archivist of the Dale, in a passion to historicize, preserve and organize this past. She is also a prolific writer of published Spiritualist histories based in her research and a practicing Medium who teaches courses and lectures on mediumistic practice. It was remarkable to me throughout my time studying to become a Medium, how people would talk about their most intimate spiritual
experiences but never share the most basic biographical information about themselves, even in more informal contexts of getting to know one another. Of course, this changes with time, and it is largely due to the practices of mediumship that I was engaged with: when you are trying to tell someone about themselves through spiritual contact, the less “conscious” knowledge you have about the person, the better. Anonymity safeguards a certain mediumistic veracity and authority. There is, it would seem, incongruence between the focus on immediate presences of the past—*the spirits are always with us*—and the historicist mind set. Mediums are always communicating the past—they are not *historicizing* the past. Rather, the Medium brings figures of the past alive, animating the present. This, it seems to me, is reflected in the relative disinterest in preserving the history of Spiritualism, with the exception of the library, the Museum, and the NSAC archive. Many are aware of dangers of losing this archive—it was often said to me by Mediums who live in the Dale, mostly with a sigh of the inevitable, that they fear someday the Museum will just “burn down” as did the Fox house that was eventually transported to Lily Dale in the 1970’s, where it was treated as a shrine until it was lost by fire. However, even this important site, the Fox House as container of Spiritualisms’ originating event, was not mourned exactly, and this it seems to me, betrays another sense of history: namely, a past that never dies because it is never converted to history—pasts stored in the body, spirits that follow the body, not as sites of memorialization but as living presences.

Spiritualism’s relation to its own history reflects what Courtney Bender says of the spiritual practitioners or “metaphysicals” she encountered in Cambridge: they “carry” their “histories at least in part in [their] practices” (Bender 2010, 5). This begs the question: “How is a tradition felt and carried when its very practice and theology claim a different reading of history and the past than what we generally understand to be carried in traditions?” (Bender 2010, 5) To
study such traditions, for they are still traditions Bender argues, one must “focus on experiential practice” and not simply historicize a tradition that refuses historicization (2010, 12). In the case of Spiritualism, where history is carried “in bodies” as I'm arguing, the question of what makes the past endure requires an attention to the way that Spiritualists understand experience. If the past is never past, but always, at least potentially, present, why preserve it? Yet there is a concomitant pull there, amongst Spiritualists particularly of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, and less so today it seems, where one finds the desire to tell an objective history of themselves, the will to make Spiritualism legible as a religion and thus to locate itself within a progressive narrative of modern history—the narrative of spiritual progress belonging inherently to Spiritualism as a movement.

**Meeting M.**

She is like a little bird—light in body, but sharp—looking here and there, her eyes always at the ready. A restless intelligence, a follower of correspondences, a plucker of threads… but also, as I would find out, frustrated by a sense of losing history, keenly aware as she is, of a Spiritualist past lost to the present generation. \textit{Everything can change but you don’t try to change what is true!} she had said: the frustration of seeing oneself a part of a tradition that has lost its grip on the present—at least \textit{as tradition}. Her commitment is to a life with the spirits, a life of intuition, of listening and living according to spiritual truths, and, at the same time, to preserving the history and “principles” of Spiritualism as a tradition. This is not a passion shared by all Spiritualists, many practitioners being less steeped in the history of Spiritualism—its principles, the early events of the movement, and the writings of its Mediums and pedagogues—and more in the
always present-tense development of spiritual communication, healing and the incorporation of “new” techniques popularized in training courses. There is a tension drawn out in M.’s defense of the “old” mediumship, the way things have been done that is being displaced by a “new mediumship” that knows nothing of where it came from, nothing of its roots in a tradition. Her concern, however, comes from a spiritual place—it seems to have less to do with defending Spiritualism dogmatically, as a *religion* as such, and more to do with the spiritual compromises of practicing a less “true” form of mediumship.

What is an event of truth, of life beyond death, of communion with spirits, if not a transformative experience of the spirit, that is, a “spiritual experience”? And isn’t it the nature of such events that we expect them to remain, endure and precisely not to dissipate—neither for us who experience them, nor as “events” that have congealed a “public,” events constituting a “religion”? What is the truth of Spiritualism to which she refers, she who has been a Spiritualist most of her life? Especially when that truth, as *experience*, is based on a communion with spirits: persons once living and now dead, de-materialized, but still *present*, as ever-progressing spiritual “intelligences,” in poten
tia, as it were. Spirits name the revenant forces of bygone lives, and the affective milieus belonging to those lives—invisible others of the past among us, somehow occupying the same pin-point of the present.

We sit on the porch at the house where she stays when in Lily Dale for the summer. This town of spirits is a *place*, airy and ephemeral, its daily clock punctuated by rituals of spirit demonstrations, healings, and inspired lectures on Spiritualist philosophy. Its airiness grounded and rounded out in the village life of afternoon visits, gossiping, schemes, frustrations with the way things are run and done, and above all, seemingly incessant recounts of spirit interventions in daily life. Though we sit on one of these many front porches that touch the
narrow roads of the Dale, it seems to me there is something placeless evoked by M.—the containers that hold everyday life, a house, a porch, a chair, appear detached and foreign in her presence, as if she would take flight at any moment. She talks fast, is full of ideas and despite her small stature, gives the impression of always speaking from a height, as if standing on her toes. And she keeps you on your toes—she is, after all, a bird from Queens. You have to stay alert, no placid responses will do. As we talk I get lost in the presence of a conversation that begins to build, a steady outpouring, surrounding us like a foggy bubble.

I’m happy to get lost with her, as we are now, on the porch at midday… screened in from the Lily Dale theater of passers by, the sun shining in, the intermittent sound of wind chimes hanging from porch fronts. When she talks she appears larger, transcending the thin narrow frame of an elderly woman. She is to be taken seriously. She sees herself above all as a teacher and a Spiritualist historian, she has written many small books on the forgotten histories of Spiritualist teachings, drawing on the source material she has collected during countless hours spent in the attic-like archive—“they call this my cave!”—in a small cottage in the Dale, which houses the offices of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC). Meeting her there for the first time by chance, or spiritual correspondence, depending on your view of such happenings, I was astounded by the ramshackle collection—a saturation of materials stretching back to the beginnings of the Spiritualist movement, but in what seemed complete disorder, of Spirit paintings on the walls, albums of spirit photographs, old books and series of journals and magazines. As I flipped through albums of spirits confined within sepia colored photographs, I heard a woman in the corner mumbling to herself in frustration: Was she talking to me? I wasn’t sure at first. She suddenly looks in my direction and says she has spent hours and hours already today simply to organize all the materials in this “cave.” We begin to talk…
What bothers me right now is this new mediumship they are promoting, where you just yell out a name and somebody belongs to that name and you have to find who they belong to. If you are communicating with spirit, spirit shows itself to you and you know where your going with it... you know exactly who you are going to... and they are coming around the Dale and they are teaching us wrong!

Her eyes flash.

*Spirit should come to you.*

*If my [deceased] mother doesn’t know who I am... I mean I don't want 15 people raising their hands to my name, M... and then they just “leave you with love”!* 

She half snorts, half laughs.

She refers to the rote endings of most spirit messages, which Medium’s in training are taught to say: “and I’ll leave that with you with love and light!” A concluding refrain after the spirit’s message, which often leaves receiver with words that hover in the air, sometimes so vague as to leave them unsure of their meaning, or too banal to properly “land.” Because M. has taught Mediumship for much of her adult life, she is no stranger to the mechanics of mediumistic practice. Yelling out a name, is a practice typically aligned with an English way of working (as distinguished from the American way), where the medium will begin by mentioning a number of characteristics of the spirit and allow the audience to respond, slowly narrowing down the number of receivers by adding more characteristics, and by allowing oneself to be intuitively guided to the right recipient. The American way, by contrast, is to go directly to someone in the audience, to ask their permission to give them a message and to make the connection with spirit for that person. The English way often appears as a guessing game, and the lesser Medium will make “mistakes,” sometimes having to leave one recipient for another. M. is critical of this way of doing things—one should know who one is with, who among the living the message is for, she tells me. The connection should be unequivocal: “the spirit should come to you.”
You know why they are doing that—because they are teaching mediumship in a week or two! But mediumship takes years. One week won’t do it!

Once you step up to the podium, you have to click in with the spirits. That is their problem... there is too much storytelling. You don't run around the platform like a jerk... your not on an exercise-machine. You are up there to be reverent, and spirit can laugh and be funny, but they deserve our respect.

And the other thing I don’t agree with... this business of time clocks, 30 minutes to do messages, readings... its like “time is up, sorry about that... your loved one's didn’t come through? Too bad.” That is not how I was taught. So I just go on and give the message. And say, you gotta understand, I’m not just gonna slam the door on spirits face...

She leads her life by intuition: “I’ve got a clear intuition. My life is just intuition.” Her stories are always bringing in others, other images, situations, faces conjured… but then, when she talks about spirit, another presence enters in. Not just a story of words, but of “clouds of witnesses” hovering above the story, spirits propelling her words forward. She is driven by the spirits—they are in her every sentence, hanging on, figures pulled or pulling every word. M. describes how she sees the spirit which often appears to “build up” right before her eyes, to the right or left of the sitter, like “whispy” entities winding their way up from the ground floor as they slowly “take on a jacket” or other clothing and become recognizable. This is a little unusual, to see “objectively.” Most of the Medium’s I speak with talk of clairvoyant seeing, the unfolding of inner images in the mind, or sensed in a tactile way through the body. Though, she says, other times it is more intuition: “I just feel it. I just know it.”

Again and again she laments that Mediumship has become about money and that money is corruptive: The first thing you say, oh I need new living room furniture... and I’ll have a new car... and everything has to be new and more extravagant. And they are not doing spirits’ work— they are making money! Against this emphasis on money, M.’s lives by the certainty that
the spirits will take care of you—of all your needs, even the most material and mundane—if you trust them.

Your taken care of if you do it right! If you don’t have a fee and just take donations—for one thing, you make more money than if you have a fee. Because people are so grateful for what they got...

And I have two examples, I’ll never forget in my life:

I had my father’s armchair in a small room and this man came in for a reading. He sat across from me in the other corner of the room. And he came in and I began taping as I always do... but I went into trance and I didn’t mean to, didn’t want to, it just happened! When I woke up he was sitting here on the floor with his hand on my knee with his recorder... and I said “what are you doing?!” and he said, “I’m recording your message,” and I asked, “why couldn’t you stay over there?” she said, pointing to his chair, and he said “I’m recording everything your saying, I didn’t want to miss a single thing.” And when he left he laid 500 dollars in the donation box, and I said to him, “I can’t take that” to which he replied, “yes you can,” and said “you don’t know what you just did!” and I said ‘I didn’t do anything, spirit did it.’ So he explained, “I am an inspector for the Chernobyl explosion... and you spoke in Russian. And you gave me the answer we were looking for!” So I thanked him. I got a letter from him later and in the letter was another 500 dollars! And see, that makes up for all the people I read for nothing... and that is my theory... I’m very against all these fees they are charging.

It is this sense of the spirits in everything, from solving scientific enigmas to the more mundane activities of finding lost objects and getting paid, that M. conveys in her stories. But this proximity of the spirits also comes through knowledge of the past, through her attention and commitment to Spiritualism as an archive and a practical tradition.

Knowing the history helps with your mediumship, she said. I am struck by this statement. For in her emphasis on the old ways, and generally knowing Spiritualist history more than anyone I encountered, she always comes back to how such a knowledge of the past bears upon the present practices of mediumship, bringing to a truer experience of the spirit world. As is history appears as a tool in the service of an a-historical experience.

And I gave an address on the ‘Principles of Spiritualism.’ And I felt everyone making faces—and I said you all can make faces but I’m going to tell you what you need to know and why you need
to respect them... and first there were only three... and I told them all that went on—cause someone said ‘they came from spirit’ No! they didn’t. They fought over the principles for eight years! And they wanted to make sure they kept Christianity out of Spiritualism. And you gotta remember they were all Christians... but they had found something else. Before on Sundays, they didn’t have church...they had philosophical discussions and people would bring their dinners. For eight years! So I talked about the development of the ideas and why we should keep it the way it is and not go with all this new nonsense!

The anticipation that everyone will “make faces” in response to the idea of a lecture on the Principles of Spiritualism, accords with M.’s sense that the hurried “new mediumship,” which caters to shorter courses and thus is more profitable, whilst skipping over anything other than “mechanics,” is uninterested in the details of its past, of the difficult making and rehearsing of a tradition. This is further exemplified in her insistence on Spiritualist principles not coming directly from “the spirit” but through the slow and painstaking process of redaktion—the over eight years of arguments about what principles should be included.

And now they are changing terminology— like they say ‘channeling’ instead of trance... but its just because they don’t know and they don’t want to go back and research... so they just give it a different name and put a different slant on it. But this takes away from the reality! We’ve been doing this since 1848!

Everything in our conversation ultimately returns, however, to the relationship with Spirit. The emphasis on the right way of doing things—“you are taken care of if you do it right,”—returns to the sense that this living relationship is a two-way street. The spirits will take care of you, if you maintain a right relation with them—one that is uncorrupted and undistorted. Part of avoiding such distortion in the living relationship to the spirit is knowledge of the movement, its principles and its teachings.

While Lily Dale as space, in which the tradition of Spiritualism is self-consciously performed in identification with its principles and primary figures, this seems always in tension with the flow of spirit communication itself, which is always of the present and resists
historicization. Thus Mediums seem at once concerned to locate themselves within the tradition, while otherwise mostly occupied with the present experience of spirits and the various metaphysical explanations that become popular in developing such experiences. And those who consider themselves Spiritualist, identifying with the movement as a religion, are at the same time part of a larger constellation of beliefs and practices of those who generally describe themselves as “spiritual not religious,” and draw from a number of “new age” philosophies. As Robert Cox has said of Spiritualism: “always lacking in authoritative texts or structures, Spiritualism was inherently polyvocal, and Spiritualists themselves charted disparate histories of their movement, often several at once (Cox 2003, 5).
Part II. The Spectral Indian: Settlement and its Foundations

2.1. America as Space: A Prehistory of Settlement as Spiritual Geography

I read somewhere that Olson once said that in Billy Budd, “the stutter is the plot.” ... It’s the stutter in American literature that interests me. I hear the stutter as a sounding of uncertainty. What is silenced or not quite silenced. All the broken dreams... History has happened. The narrator is disobedient. A return is necessary, a way for women to go. Because we are in the stutter. We were expelled from the Garden of the mythology of the American Frontier. The drama’s done. We are the wilderness. We have come on to the stage stammering.

—Susan Howe, The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History

The stutter is the plot. The plot that begins in the middle — after the passage across the Atlantic — before settlement can be settled into that body called a “nation.” A return is necessary. The return is to the middle, the empty spaces between words, to the desert inside language but also inside the American Myth. The Puritans had their Eye always directed Just Ahead, Just Above the ever receding horizon. Visionaries. They believed in vision so much that it replaced the earth, or rather they saw through biblical spectacles, and re-made the earth—a spiritual geography of the here and now—in their image. They saw always from above. Transcendental Eye, I am nothing I see All. They pursued a Vision of light, just ahead, just above, like the Exodus, following a cloud through the desert—a world emptied and re-made terra nullius, of settlements settling — their eyes always just ahead, always just above.

The frontier is never reached, its wave propelled ever forward. The place where we find ourselves, in the middle — America— is the place between before and after, the place of an endlessly deferred future and an always repeated past. Of America, Lawrence said “once you have conquered a thing, you have lost it. Its real relation to you collapses” (Lawrence). The frontier is both really “closed,” in the sense of a conquered land, and at the same time never
closed—as a virtual, and thus repeatable relation. Not a place just ahead, but a relation to an always conjured, outside. The frontier needs an outside.

In the now of the present, the frontier is no longer the edge of a movement across space, always forward along the line of linear time, but a movement inside space, a fold of time turned upon itself, in a repetition of the before haunting foundation. From extensive to intensive, from external movement across space to an intensive movement within, there is folding of external Space into inner Affect or Image, or rather spectre. Such repetitions, as differential returns, are always spectral: the spectral as revenant. The spectral is the crack, or issues through cracks of settlement, of all that was excluded, negated, killed, enclosed. The spectral is the stutter within language, it is the outside folded inside, the boundaries of the American conquering, the body of the American…and especially here, the American woman as Medium, who stammers forth in a language of lost images: images of the conquering and conquered images.

The stutter is the plot that begins in an awareness, new and profound, of that fact belonging most intimately, most internally, to American experience—space. As the poet Charles Olsen said, “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes larger here. Large, and without mercy” (Olsen 1997). America is the fourth direction, the West, that open space—Atlantis, Avalon or Tir na Gog—as the ancient dream-space of Europe, dreaming against the enclosure of its own history (Fiedler 1968).

A Spiritual Geography of Settlement

To talk about “religious experience,” as I want here to do, unfolded within a spiritual geography of American settlement, is to talk about a real encounter, an encounter with the real as both the
outside of Space and an inside of Spirit. My aim is to situate the emergence of American
Spiritualism’ in the 19th century within the prehistory of Puritan settlement, not as an historical
argument, but to think through a set of associations and correspondences that place Spiritualism
within a particular nexus of spectral inheritances (figural, affective and conceptual), belonging to
settler religious experience. Spiritualism, thus inherits a spiritual geography of settlement, which,
I’m proposing, offers a way of thinking the doubleness of the body, in mediumship, as both
Space or container for spectres (spirit-images) and itself an extendable spectral Shape or image.

What Olson calls SPACE is something, a matter, of which the “American” experience is
made. For space in America is too much, “it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.” For
the settler such an encounter carries with it ambivalence—the ambivalence of something that
does not fit what came before. This experience demands a new paradigm, as much as a new body,
one affected by the encounter of this so-called Wilderness. How can the body make of itself a
space adequate to such an “outside”? The encounter with an outside must be converted into
“experience,” taken-in as affective remnant of an outer-disturbance—to become an inner-space.
Beginning with the Puritan settlement, who saw themselves in a world of divine and demonic
wonders, we see a failure to suture what is encountered in this new SPACE, the New World—the
encounter is experienced as a spiritual conflict, a space conflating the outer Wilderness with the
demonic Shapes of Indians, and the inner bounds of Puritan society, as “hedge of God,” with
spectres of Puritan witches.

What is distinctive about settler societies as opposed to other colonial formations, is that
settlement, as in North America or Australia, is always about LAND, and not foremost the
extraction of labor, as was the case especially in Latin America or the Caribbean (Wolfe 1999, 3).
If SPACE is the central fact of America, so too is the displacement of the first-people embodying
that space — the “Indian.” For space to be conquered it must be internalized, converted from something extensive to something intensive that can be assimilated — space must become image — exemplified in the spectralization, the ghosting, of the actual violence of settlement, and with it the figure of that violence, the Indian. The “Indian” here becomes a generalized figure of land conquered, and converted, to an ambivalent image that returns — spectral and haunting — as the figural remnant of settlement, stubborn because unassimilable.

But conversions often fail. Conversions become conversion disorders, opening a gap in the narrative of settlement through which something else, something “altogether preternatural,” to ventriloquize Cotton Mather, issues forth. The unconverted spectre, as remnant, is found, I suggest, in that other space — the body — both as a spectral body that haunts, and in the settler’s body that is haunted. What is this movement between inside and outside, space and inner “experience,” converging in the story of North American settlement as a geography of spectral bodies? A geography simultaneously within and without the settler’s body, haunted by the “Indian” as spectre/spirit/ghost of settlement? The settlers take possession of LAND and in turn are possessed by those they “cleared” from the LAND. Actual space, I want to say, is always already haunted by invisible fields of affects and sensations that move through bodies and make up, in successive and serial movement, the modern “problem” of experience as much as of the body — of what must be gathered into a “self” as subject of experience, as much as a “nation” as subject of history. It has often been said that the body after modernity is a haunted body, and here, in the prehistory of North American settlement, where the spirits hover like so many unsettled fragments, now seem to exist, not in the land — itself deterritorialized and quantified — but in the body.
2.2. Anne and the Indian

There are moments which one can call the crises which alone are important in a life. These are moments when the outside seems abruptly to respond to the sum of what we throw forth from within, when the exterior world opens to encounter our heart and establishes a sudden communication with it.

—Michel Leiris, “Alberto Giocometti” (Pietz 1985)

In the first chapter of the first published narrative written by an Anglo-American woman, ostensibly to serve as a reminder of God’s Providence, Native Americans are called “murderous wretches,” “bloody heathen,” “hell-hounds,” “ravenous bears,” “wolves. (Howe, 95).

— Susan Howe, The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History

I was told, you can’t miss it. The house at the end of the road toward Cassadega Lake sits pretty in pink at the corner. There is a screened-in porch with pastel furniture and the floorboards even, are pink. Pink like a quiet affirmation. A girl’s world that has nothing to do with age, but with something that slips through the cracks — girls, after all, “slip in everywhere” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987)— like this pink house here, on the corner… and (the thought occured to me) isn’t Lily Dale itself a pink-place that slipped through the cracks of common sense ordinary-orderliness and patriarchal measure? Houses decorated in whimsy, or “fancy” — a funny word. Fancy, says Susan Howe, “is the lower aggregating and associative power of the mind” (Howe 1993, 11). A word that is interchangeably used with “enthusiasm,” particularly of the religious kind, and in romantic literature where fancy, says Coleridge—and fancy is a ‘different faculty than imagination— was something “Shakespeare possessed” (1993, 11-12). So you can possess fancy, or it can possess you, which is maybe much the same.

The gardens of the houses I pass are occupied by wind chimes and miniatures fancies: a garden full of bears, of varying sizes, looking back at passers by, one of fairies, or butterflies, or
angels. It is childish, it is kitschy and playful, full of fancy: femininity carried in the word.

“Fancy [is] considered as the faculty of bringing together images dissimilar in the main by some one point or more of likeness distinguished […]” (Howe 1993, 11). Coleridge describes the fanciful play of imagistic associations, finding the refrain of like images in difference.

Untangling these threads of fancy, Susan Howe describes the fanciful as the “power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others, and by a sort of fusion to force many into one” (1993, 11).

Walking around Lily Dale often strikes me as a place where space opens up and you can encounter people, as inseparable from the atmosphere you find yourself suspended in, as if, caught in a snow globe, we are all in a scene in which background and foreground are synced. It is the silence of the place that shelters this atmosphere of fancies—and shelters you in its daydream of vast blue sky encircling low Victorian houses, scenes of human life surrounded by the old growth forest of Leolyn Woods. These ancient trees are places of prophecy. In those woods there is “the stump” of inspiration, or “Inspiration Stump,” as it is called. A place where Spiritualists would gather to hear the inspired messages of mediums delivered to rows of eager listeners, while standing on the large stump of an old tree. Now the stump has been filled in with concrete and is surrounded by a low white picket-fence to discourage those who might, forgetting themselves, try and stand on the old stump as in bygone days. The stump is a relic of the past, you no longer stand on it, but stand next to it, delivering messages to audiences sitting, in this church in the woods, on benches extending out in a half-circle hidden beneath the canopy of trees. Everyone says you can still feel the “energy” radiating from that fenced in center, described as a concretion (no pun intended) of all the spirit-power that has gathered there by Mediums giving “demonstrations” every summer since 1898.
I think everything has a spiritual counterpart, she said.

And something I learned very early but wasn’t taught, was aware of, was the life energy in everything and very early in life I could see the auras of trees and plants. Some of these trees—and I know here in Lily Dale — some of these trees have been here so long and this whole place has been so infused with this spiritual consciousness through the people coming here... I think even these trees have been infused with this consciousness.

There is no heat here, only cool breezes, breezes wafting through doors, and into ever-sunlit rooms. Her presence is like that. She wears pastels—always sky blues, lilacs, and various shades of pinks that must carry names like petal, mauve, or the soft gray-pink you get when you mix the starker cadmium reds and the flat, opaque titanium whites. As she appears before me now, in my minds eye, it is always as color—she is a figure of color—one cannot think of her apart from color, and the color is always one, solid, from head to toe. She is a soft glow that you can’t see through — transparent and opaque at once. Even her blue eyes have the look of an elsewhere in them, glazed by a far away. She told me, smiling, that she used to bathe her white miniature poodle in beet juice “to make her pink”: “I just love pink!” She has, what may be called “aura.”

Anne’s journey as a Medium seems to have begun in in Cassedega, Florida—by many accounts the lesser sister camp to the first Spiritualist camp, Lily Dale, in Upstate New York. Today her gifts are widely acknowledged, and her biography well known. Anne grew up Mennonite, and eventually married a former Jesuit Priest become Professor of English who taught at Georgetown. She is known throughout the country and abroad for her mediumship, and around Lily Dale she is nothing less than a celebrity — and as everyone keeps telling me, she even went to give readings to the royal family in Butan!

She now sits, ankles crossed in that feminine way, in a lavender pant suit, to the left side of me on her pink and white veranda. Our conversation is caught in silent breezes. But she does not
lose herself, she does not trail off. I am impressed by her pointed intelligence, and a strange sense of awareness — as if you are pulled into a space at once dreamy and relaxed. She seems tired after teaching a class I had attended that day on the Principles of Spiritualist Mediumship, so I try to give her space.

As a child I felt a certain freedom that I appreciated and I think earlier in my life I might have felt a little bit neglected in some ways...

I wanted to ask about her childhood, I wanted to know more about the experiences, the visitations she had alluded to in class.

Because I didn’t have a strong structure with discipline... but it took me not long to realize that that was so good... because it allowed me to become myself, and be what I wanted to be. Had I been disciplined, and kept in that box, my life probably would have been very different.

Anne came from what she referred to in her biography as an “old order” Mennonite family in Petosky, Michigan (Gieseman 2009). Mennonites are compared to the Amish in dress and attitude toward technology. From a very young age she would lie on a blanket under a tree, or take a walk in the woods, and would go on spiritual journeys to other realms. People from the community would come and ask her questions and her parents would let her give them accounts of what she saw and sensed about their lives.

Beatrice [Anne] set two chairs in a corner of the dining room. Mrs. Swenor came in, and Anne sat across from her. The little girl didn’t know what they were supposed to talk about, so she told Mrs. Swenor about the old lady standing at her side who had green eyes just like hers. She mentioned a name that appeared in her mind and passed along a greeting. “And she suffered from a problem here,” Anne said, rubbing her small hand on her chest. Anne didn’t know if she’d said the right thing, but Mrs. Swenor seem satisfied. She thanked Anne’s mama, then they got up and left. Soon more neighbors camp to call, one after the other. They knocked at the door and said, “I want to talk with little Beaty Anne. […] She didn’t understand why nobody else could see the people she saw, nor why some of the neighbors cried when she described the friendly spirits. But after they dried their tears, the visitors always left smiling (Gieseman 2009, 19).

A: I think that people in the community just became aware of my spiritual gifts and so they would ask to come in. I don’t think my mom and Dad avowed a lot of it, necessarily—just occasionally, you know. They were very protective of me.
E: but it didn’t conflict with their beliefs really?

A: I think it probably would have if it hadn’t been me, their own daughter. Because they observe things that happen to me from the time I was just very young, very little and I think they learned from that, the reality of it, you see. So... being the thoughtful people they were, and the spiritually minded, I don’t think they saw it as conflicting. And my dad, God bless him, he read the bible everyday, and we always had our family meetings in the evening when the Bible was read. But he’d always find some part of the Bible, or sometimes just a verse or two, that made this acceptable, that gave it a blessing. I don’t think it was a lot of encouragement, but it was support of what happened anyway.

As one of her earliest experiences Anne recalls seeing the room in which she was born with “cheery yellow walls [...] and a pictures of an angel” framed above the bed (Gieseman 2009, 1). She later would recount this memory to her mother who remembered well the yellow wallpaper and the picture of the angel “having worked at the maternity home in Petosky, Michigan where she had given birth.” Anne’s memory, if that is the word, of being born was “met with stunned silence,” according to her biography (Gieseman 2009, 1).

She speaks fondly of her father, who used to invent things. He was so smart and even though he had only three years of education, he actually patented a species of flower... a yellow geranium... before that many things happened. He was kicked out of the Mennonite church because he was found with a typewriter in the loft of the barn, taking part in a correspondence course. He was then hired by a Professor/farmer from Fenton University to work the farm and this man recognized a kind of genius in the good Mennonite, and sent him to college at Fenton where he studied horticulture. Every year I can remember the news letters coming in and here would be my fathers photograph — which he didn’t believe in photography I mean... I have no pictures of my young childhood! There were no photographs taken in our family. Anne pointed out, there is a passage in the bible that says “thou shalt have no graven images before me,”
referring to the iconoclasm of the Mennonite tradition. *But my dad valued the education and all, and though he completed his degree, he did not take his diploma:* “instead he returned to his Mennonite roots where hard work was more important than a piece of paper” (Gieseman 2009, 5).

Dressed in the plain clothes of a Mennonite, the body is an image denuded of imagination or fancy… nor is a body to be reflected upon and indexed in a photograph. *There were no photographs taken in our family.* The body as a figure/Shape of Godliness, reflects a holy simplicity, the outer appearance reflecting the inner purity of the soul… But little Anne was full of images, or rather images moved through Anne in the form of the many-faced *visitations of Spirit.*

*I loved in the spring and summer… I loved taking my nap on the blanket under a big tree in the front yard… and I remember just lying there and looking up through the branches into the big sky. And often times I’d see a Little Indian Friend and the Pony he was riding was just as real as he was, interestingly, and he would come down and always come and pull me up onto his pony and we’d go off… like i was flying off into the sky… and he would take me to different places in the spirit world. And looking back at that it was more than imagination. I guess they worked through my mind in some way that made it comfortable for me to just let go.*

*It was more than imagination.*

“She thought of these adventures as dreams, for she didn’t know what else to call them. […] He’d reach out his hand to pull her up beside him, and they’d gallop away to what Anne later realized were different realms of reality” (Gieseman 2009, 19). These childhood spirit visitors — her “little Indian Friend” — felt altogether more “ethereal-like,” she told me, than the games she played as a child in which she imagined her dolls alive, and had imaginary friends. Anne makes the distinction: *I had imagination in my play that didn’t involve spirit… so I would say that, imagination and imaginary friends and doll things… I think I felt grounded here and would know that that’s what it is [imaginary]. While the spiritual experiences, I don’t think I ever thought of*
that as imagination... because it all seems so... and as I’m comparing the two... I can feel how soft and ethereal that felt ... as opposed to touching my dolls and touching my playthings.

In Anne’s visitation a presence comes toward her, and pulls her up into it, like entering an image... they fly off into the sky. You feel the presence as if it were more real than real — the opposite of imagination, if imagination is always accompanied by an awareness that you are suspending reality. But what constitutes this opposition between imagination and reality, even when the reality is a spiritual one, and thus by nature difficult to prove? An experience “ethereal like” is just as flimsy, as those attributed to fancy or here, imagination. But then, what matters is perhaps a minor difference that makes a difference—like the transition between standing in place and leaping in place: a leaping in place (saut sur place) as the imperceptible transition, “of the whole body which exchanges its organic will for a spiritual will” (Deleuze 1990). There is a sleight difference in feeling —how soft and ethereal that felt— when set against both the play world of the child’s imagination and the “grounded here” reality, as if the “ethereal quality” is tactile in a softer way, less locatable, than the “here” of imaginary play. It is the spiritual presence the child feels of her “little Indian” that lifts her off this ground of the imagined world and into “flight.”

 Trafficking in the realm of images as spiritual scenes is cloudy territory, for the location of such affecting images is hard to discern. Neither coming from a circumscribable inside of subjective experience, nor from a locatable outside, and in the case of Anne’s “little Indian,” belonging both to the realm of spirit and to the land—her visionary experience unfolding in a space of “nature” under the tree of childhood. What seems distinct about this realm of images, and the sensations accompanying them, are the milieus or tiny worlds they draw along with
them, catalyzing an experiential ambiguity, expressed by Mediums as the hard-to-pin distinction between sensory experience, spiritual perception, and imagined realities.

Accompanying Anne’s earliest memories of spirit presences is the space of freedom these experiences occupied: freedom from discipline and freedom as congruent with a sense of ‘neglect’ and a tone of loneliness. Freedom that “allowed me to become myself,” she had said, freedom to become, in other words, the Medium of her experiences. Had I been kept in that box [...] my life probably would have been very different. To be boxed up, or to box up one’s experiences. A box can prevent you from becoming, from following the many intensities that pass through you, or it can provide the minimum enclosure necessary for the dreamer. Instead of the box, there is the blanket under the tree, a shape that contains and protects the dreamer.

Describing the protected atmosphere of forgetful relaxation in which storytelling begins, Benjamin says, boredom plays a sheltering role: “boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience” (Benjamin 1968, 91). It is in this halfway space between dreaming and waking, protected in an egg-like container, that such flimsy things—the images and sensations called “experience”—can move to the foreground. For experience to be an event, to be re-presenced and expressed in some medium — as in a story — it first needs to grow in that egg-like container of non-thought, the non-thought of the body. Is it any wonder then that Deleuze refers to this second-body of sensation, the Body Without Organs, as an egg composed of intensive thresholds, thresholds through which variations compose transformations in the body itself? (Deleuze 2003). These are delicate thresholds within, through which forms of life emerge as if from an elsewhere, without, the place of spirits as real beings composed at the edges of cloudy sensations: I can feel how soft and ethereal that felt. Here, becoming the medium of one’s experiences means making
room for the spirits — or in another register, allowing conscious thought to step aside, so that a space can be cleared for the thought of the body, giving rise to the fanciful figures of experience.

**A Curious Focus**

The world of the child, says Virginia Woolf, is a world occupied by a “curious focus; it sees an air-ball or a shell with extreme distinctness; I still see the air-balls, blue and purple, and the ribs of the shells; but these points are enclosed in vast *empty spaces* [italics mine].”

—Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*

In Chardin’s painting, *Boy Blowing Bubbles*, from 1739, the bubble emerges through an act of attention. The boy’s attention, his intent gaze, is at the same time the making of the bubble, a tiny transparent world, at once visual and haptic. “A youth with a straw transforms that formless liquid opacity into the transparent sphere of a soap bubble…” and this transformation, argues Jonathan Crary, partakes in the 18th century occupation of “ensuring transparency over opacity”: “that the distorting power of a medium, whether lens, air or liquid, be neutralized” through mastery of the medium (Crary 1992, 63-64). The magic is to make the medium disappear, to “neutralize” its intervening or distorting presence as that which mediates an objective reality to a subject. And yet, in Chardin’s work, “vision and touch work cooperatively,” says Crary, as part of a mode of knowledge in which “touch and optics” are not autonomous or opposed but reflective of the “co-identity of idea and matter” (1992). The inner realm of spirit or idea is itself sensory, as realized the sensory extension of the child’s thought or attention into the bubble itself. Blowing bubbles is a child’s play, whereby the empirical “immediacy of sense experience” bubbles into an external space, at once haptic and visual—a globular ephemeral world. It is as if, through the practice of attention, we extend ourselves into some outer material,

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18 Woolf 1985, 78.
a second-body: as in, the shellness of the shell, which reveals a space, however small or ephemeral, where space and sensation coincide, as do extension and intension, form and matter. And by virtue of this mysterious intension become extension, like the “creature that hides and ‘withdraws into a shell,’” we prepare “‘a way out’” (Bachelard 1969, 111).

The child’s world is punctuated by realities that appear so discrete, so distinct — the shellness of the shell—as if surrounded by vast empty spaces. It is not enough to say the child is small and the world seems large and full of space. For it is the child that sees even the smallest things in cosmic form, as little worlds unto themselves. And doesn’t this have something to do with the capacity to get absorbed in an object, wherein we enter into the object as a world unto itself?

This bubble of Chardin’s is then, I want to say, a perfect image of the child’s world, in which things appear in “extreme distinctness,” as Woolf said. It seems to me, in the larger context here, the child’s bubble as little atmosphere has little to do with “neutralizing” distortion through a Cartesian mastery of the medium, and much to do with the way inner forms of idea and image are already sensuous, and thus creative of a formal space that folds abstraction and sensation.

Such a folding has something to do with making room for something to appear—like vast empty spaces surrounding a figure, that bring the figure into distinction. The figure then appears like a world unto itself, a cut-out world, a fold of idea and sensation.

Many bright colors; many distinct sounds; some human beings, caricatures; comic; several violent moments of being, always including a circle of the scene which they cut out: and all surrounded by a vast space — that is a rough visual description of childhood. [Italics mine] (Woolf 1985, 79).
Elsewhere in her memoirs, Woolf says that these cut-out fragments of childhood memories included the invisible presence of her dead mother, whose “voice” she could hear at moments… and such fragments, both visual and auditory, would be the driving force of her writing, little multi-sensory worlds she could re-enter as an adult, through the medium of writing.

The Mediums often tell me that they first saw spirits in childhood, that it was in childhood that they felt closest to the spirit world, a closeness they would later forget and only remember with the onset of their mediumship—as if, in childhood, there were no distortions, no mediating screens even, between the living and the realm of the dead. Is it reaching too far to say that sensing the dead has something to do with the capacity, likened to an immediacy felt in childhood, of entering into certain images as animate worlds?

In the space of the garden, which is a circle like window onto a cut-out scene, lying on her blanket and looking up through the branches of a big tree into the big sky, she sees the world is vast and full of presences. The little Indian on the pony that descends to meet her appears all the more discrete against the vast blue sky: “and the pony was just as real as he [the Indian] was.” The space of the vision itself seems to include the body, in an entire milieu of sensations—not just the image of the little Indian on a pony, but how real it felt — the sensation of ‘flying,’ the description of a total atmosphere that includes within its globe the perceiver, the seer. She finds herself in a space in which she is not the observer, standing outside looking in, but fully absorbed in an atmosphere. A space vast like the child’s world, in which entities can step forward in their figural discreteness, like a cactus in the desert. In this way, the spiritual gives itself to be seen.

It is as if by entering into an image, which unfolds an atmosphere, that the event of seeing is converted into experience and can be counted as “experience.” Why is this true of some
images and not others? Why do some images take on life, even spirit, can be entered into and felt, as events of experience — that happened to me — while other images remain empty and dead?

Composing tiny objects of sense into “wholes,” as Woolf said, that would “lay them to rest,” a space is made for the restless spirits. The “fragments of memory” Woolf describes—but, it seems to me, it would better to call them experiences, for they are not remembered so much as re-experienced—are the effects of what she calls “shocks” of realization, perception or affection. Like blows to the head, these shocks convey the excess of meaning and sensation within what occurs, that is too much for the child to take in: “exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off” (Woolf 1985, 78). In this shock of meanings’ surge, the sensation becomes discrete, an experience that stays with you, as opposed to all those that are forgotten (and as Woolf points out, sometimes it is the more dramatic or literally “shocking” event that is easily forgotten). It is the haunting presence that writing might “lay to rest,” just as the psychoanalyst draws words from the patient to lay to rest, not her feelings exactly, but the shock itself of her feelings: “And I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it, I explained it and then laid it to rest” (Woolf 1985, 81).

The Medium seems to open herself to such invisible returns. What returns here, is not so much the shock of meaning of something latently within you, but something that comes from the outside—a return of a past not yours but someone else’s. For these returns, the Medium must fold into herself a circle of space in which a past, as figure and atmosphere at once, may take shape and grow within her. Here the passive feeling of being affected or even taken over, possessed by an ‘excess’ of sensation, is met with the Medium’s desire to become an agent of
such sensations—to actively call forth and hold onto the spirit-images, by making a space within herself for their appearance. They pass through, and in their passing they occupy a space within the body, itself acting as a circle, bubble or container of sensation. The Medium is taught not to hold on too tight, to take the spirit in too deeply, that is, not to take in the sometimes difficult, sad or traumatic sensations of a life lived, that the spirits convey.

You must, like Woolf says of the writer, find a way to express and release. Being in these states of sensation, what Woolf herself calls “invisible presences,” can feel like suspension: “I see myself as a fish in a stream, deflected, held in place, but cannot describe the stream” (1985, 80). What often fails us is the expression — to take hold of sensations even if only for a moment — to collect invisible presences on a string of associations — and so, to make them endure a little longer, to find a way to bring them close as “real beings” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). It is not just about releasing them, but about expressing them so as to make them endure — keeping the image or spirit alive.

Spirits do not appear as images alone, they are painted to life, as the Mediums say, insofar as they become animate within a sensory atmosphere that grows within you as you “develop” the image. The development of such inner worlds, tiny globular spaces of sense and sensation, shed light on the Spiritualist’ sense of the body as cosmos, enveloped within an “infinite sensorium,” connected by a “sympathetic nervous system,” imagined the cosmic threads that make possible the instantaneous communication between sympathetic bodies (whether living or dead), like a bodily telegraph, uniting mind and body, and defying time and distance (Cox 2003, 89). Living or dead, we are all “spirits” and spirits are “boundless” — they are everywhere at home, linked in sympathetic chains of spiritual communion, “omnipresent” as “an architectonic element”
pervading “the whole ethereal ocean, in which suns and stars and planets and comets swim.”
(Cox 2003, 89)

The Child’s World and the Indian

Anne’s initiatory flights with the spirits were always outside, in nature. Once while in the woods as a child, Anne tells me she encountered a Native American man, in spirit, who gave the child a stone: a Petoskey stone, from Petoskey, Michigan. That is the only place in the world where you find those stones. I’ll never forget the man who handed it to me. I can remember looking up at him, he probably wasn’t that tall it just felt like it. Felt like the vast spaces of the child’s world. He placed it in the palm of my hand and he told me to always carry it with me and I’d never be lost…the stone would always take me back. Take her back to the before within the present, the child’s world and the spirits world.

In an entirely red colored pamphlet entitled “Why Red Indians are Spirit Guides,” originally published in 1940 by a Spiritualist, Frederic Harding, which I obtained in the Lily Dale bookstore one summer, the author states that his purpose for writing is to shed light on “the frequency with which there appear from the Spirit side of life, members of a race of people, which had not been thought about since childhood’s adventurous beginnings” (1940, 1).

In this sentence alone the “Indians” to which Harding refers, are rendered forgotten relics of the child’s “adventurous” fancies and simultaneously resurrected as spectres—the frequent visitors at Spiritualist séance tables. Echoing the earlier Jacksonian era proclamations as to the inevitable disappearance of the Indian, and the settler’s alignment of the nation’s “primitive” beginnings with the beginnings of life in childhood, a life destined to be superseded by the inevitable adulthood of white-modern-progress, the Spiritualist tells us that it is certainly a
“queer” thing that these “original natives of this American continent” should be so present today. If the appearance of the “Indian” is queer, such presentness is also a sign of the spiritual development,” of the (white) nation; for the Spiritualist, in arriving at “the absolute truth of the psychic phenomena” must find herself in “a vivid and insistent relationship with the Spirits of the Red Skins” (Harding 1940, 2). Thus the spiritual ascendance of the settler is here conditioned by the continuous “vivid and insistent” relationship between the settler and the spirits of those “Red Skins,” their very settlement displaced. The author is determined on this point—that “Indians are everywhere in mediumship” and that “to be aware of Spiritual truth in America […] is to be aware of the Red Man” (Harding 1940, 2).

But what is the purpose of these Native presences? The author tells us it is far more than amusement! “We may not have stopped to think why there are frightful and amusing little Indian girls to make us laugh when we are getting too sad in circles, and all those loyal, strong Braves in nearly everybody’s Band of Spirit Collaborators.” In order to understand why they are present now, as “discarnate Indians,” the author tells us we must understand who they were “before,” before the “White Man” that is. We, the Spiritualists must see “why [it is that] things of the Spirit come so easily and naturally to the Red Man on the other side of the veil between the states of Life.”

What follows is a story about the spiritual gifts of the “Indian,” and what the Spiritualist calls, their greater understanding of the “Great Spirit,” which they never imagined as a “Man who sat on a throne in some far of Heaven” but as an “Infinite” power “with an intelligence whose might extended everywhere into all things” (Harding 1940, 4). A religion without “creeds nor clergy” and no “mythological system of deities,” they “worshipped one God,” and this, Harding wants to show, coincides with Spiritualist beliefs in an “Infinite Intelligence” beyond
doctrine—for what the Natives believed (that is, “before”) is now brought to us through “Modern Spiritualism.” Spiritualism thus inherits “the same revelation” that was “brought centuries ago to these primitive inhabitants. God is one; God is Infinite; God is a Power that thinks [...]” (Harding, 1940).

Thus modern Spiritualists become the uneasy inheritors of an authentic spirituality, an untainted spirituality, belonging autochthonously to an America before the fall of white settlement, as vision of a pre-lapsarian America. And in the after of settlement, the Indian is preserved in the spirit realm, as the author goes on to say: when they are “separated from their old physical identity with the Nature of Earth,” these “nature lovers, these outdoor wandering folk,” continue their ways in Heaven. But this is an afterlife denuded of violence or blood: in a “happy Hunting Ground with the joy of the chase but without the “kill”” (Harding 1940, 5). Sublated into the ether of the spirit world, these happy Indians hunt without killing, just as in their returns as spirits, they become bodies without blood—deathless spectres. Yet still, the author is troubled: why would they, the Indians, “frequent” the Spiritualist séance? Why return to spiritually guide the White Man who “broke faith with them, taught them evil ways and took their possessions” and who “now lives on that land which they used to love” (Harding 1940, 7)? To satisfy this question, the author creates a strange parallelism: “We are many” in the present tense, but “as a result of the centuries of time that Indians lived here before we came, their Spirits are many, too.[italics mine]” (Harding 1940, 7) We are many, in the present. The past in which they were many is over, and in this present in which we are many, they can be many only as spirits. A strange sense is conveyed here, an anxiety that spirits or not, they are many. Their past having long come before us (the present of the settler) is one that weighs heavily on this present, is inherited by this present as a spiritual heaviness that the author immediately tries to
convert into a purified space of bloodless spectres: the pure and innocent spiritual origins of this land before, the adventures of our childhood imagination, and, above all, the return of the Indian as spirit, as spectre.

Without eliding the most intimate experiences of Mediums with “Native Spirits” as described by Anne—what is in this story about the experiences of American Mediums with their Indian guides, and the spiritual geography of a nation that sees its truest images—those of childhood, and those of spirit, wrapped up in the “race of peoples” they have violently and repeatedly sequestered to a past that cannot be contained?

When asked about the role nature plays in developing one’s mediumship, Anne told me that Andrew Jackson Davis — aka the Poughkeepsie Seer and one of the father’s of modern spiritualism — believed children should spend a lot of time in nature. And it was in nature where Anne had her first spiritual encounters, and these encounters were first with “Indians.” I know all my walks that started off by myself, through the woods and down by the river became the places I would meet spirit. There was a particular place where I would always meet Honto.

Anne met Honto, “a young Indian woman,” when she was around 5 or 6 years of age. “The spirit who wore her dark hair in two long braids”: I can’t remember life without Honto really… “The two would leave the shade of the tree and wander through the nearby woods. Anyone watching would see Beaty Anne walking with one arm held out to the side. She was simply holding hands with Honto” (Gieseman 2009, 19). Mostly she would walk with me and it was more of a telepathic communication with her, and she would often show me things about nature and point things out to me... The Indian spirit is the first guide, the first to bring Anne into certain knowledge of her own spiritual gifts, as well as the presences of the natural world.
Before I left the shade of her pink porch, I asked Anne why she thought Spiritualists communicate so much with Indian spirits.

*The Senecas are here, the Iroquois Nation. Yeah... I think the Quakers were also closely associated with the Native Americans. And the early Spiritualist really felt the support from both of those groups. I don’t know, I haven’t done any real study or research into the relationship of Native Americans to Spiritualism, but it’s just my feeling that the Native Americans were so metaphysical in their understanding. They did communicate with Spirit. Simply because this was their land... and so I think they automatically gravitated on the earth plane to those who were aware and gifted in that way.*

2.3. **Screen Memory: A Plastically Visual Reality**

Freud talks about screen memories as the site crossing latent and manifest content (Freud 1990).

The two contents, one manifest, or easily remembered and the other latent, hidden below the surface and unrecognizable, are related only by opaque chains of associations that must be unraveled. Tracing these opaque chains of associations is the work of the analyst. Screen memories create “chains of associations” between different temporalities—the content of a particular screen memory hiding the latent content that occurred at another moment, thereby displacing it. Sometimes what is manifest is a “false” or constructed memory, which matters little, as it’s job remains the same—to cover over the hidden content like a veil. What is interesting about screen memories is the way they draw time together in a confusion of chronology between the screen memory “and the context which is screened off by it”(Freud 1990, 63). The disparity in “content” between the screen memory and the experience which it hides, as well as the disjunct in time which such screens conjoin, speaks to a mysterious
“purpose” according to Freud, “which favors one memory while striving to work against another” (1990, 65).

As if further calling into doubt the placement of any memory whatsoever, Freud goes on to say that all “childhood memories” are to some degree “screen memories.” In these earliest memories “we possess not the genuine memory-trace but a later revision of it,” the revised version is layered by other “influences of a variety of alter psychical forces.” So it seems, childhood memories both displace the “real event” and contain it, it is both a real past and a made-up past, both event and theater. The screen masks what actually belongs to childhood, by addition, suturing the actual memory with “influences” of other moments, other forces that are present in the one who remembers at the time of their remembering. Childhood memories are thus composite layers—composed both of actual childhood images, and the “adult imagination of the child’s imagination,” as it tries to return to these earlier moments (Taussig 1999). But what does it mean to say that childhood memories, in referring back to the earliest stages, the origins, of a human life, are already revisionary displacements?

The fact that these earliest memoires are already displacements, already revisions of the past and thus never untainted by the present, never a perfect preservation of origins, must be thought side-by-side with the “remarkable” fact, says Freud, of the staying power of these earliest images. What to make of the fact that childhood memories, themselves true fictions, are

19 For example, when a memory of one’s childhood masks a more recent event, which one does not “remember,” the displacement is “retro-active or retro-gressive.” More frequently, a memory of something recent masks an earlier event, which remains unavailable to recollection, and is “pushed ahead or displaced forward” (Freud 1990, 63). Or in a “third possibility” of chronological displacement, the screen memory and the “impression that it screens” are continuous in time and content—that is, synchronous as “contemporary or contiguous screen memories” (1990, 64). These, Freud says, are “mistakes in remembering.” What one remembers is not what the memory “should have reproduced,” but “something else as substitute” (1990, 64). What one should have remembered, one does not, instead one remembers something else—it is not necessarily a false memory, but it is a memory somehow, out of place.
not forgotten but *retained*—that they endure? And moreover that this *fact* of retention, Freud says, has something to do with the *visual character* of these earliest memories. While adults may differently remember—some remember in images, others in words and so on, “in dreams these distinctions disappear: we all dream in predominantly in visual images” (1990, 67). Childhood memories, like dreams, retain this visual space—they are even “plastically visual” says Freud, who likens them to “regular scenes worked out in plastic form, comparable only to representations on the stage” (1990, 68). In the memories of childhood, we are inside the image, which unfolds around us like a play, a tableau vivant of the past. This is why Freud says, screen memories of childhood, even in adults who cannot otherwise remember in images, retain or “preserve” our “infantile memory”: the past comes to us as a *plastically visual sensory milieu*.

This trait of childhood memories, as already “screens” or revisionary displacements “offers” up a “remarkable analogy” says Freud in passing, to the way a nation “preserves” its childhood or prehistory “in its store of legend and myths.” The analogy being, as I understand it, that these earliest stories are already revisions, and displacements, at the foundations of nation-making, which, like most origins, can never be located as mixtures of truth and fiction, even as they have staying power. Composite images, screen memories, especially those of childhood, are made up of different temporal layers—true and false scenes—and are above all are colored by a strange animacy. This strange animacy, as plastically visual reality has the function of making the past return in a mode of presence, and not just any past, but a past pregnant with the sense (owing to its animacy) of origin, of authenticity. Thus the screen-images of a nation, to unfold Freud’s analogy, have the uncanny characteristic of returning from a displaced place of origins, as, I want to say, as spectral Shapes or figures of an already composite reality: more real than real, because *plastically visually* real (68). And this to say that such “myths and legends” found
in the prehistories of nations, as much as of an individual, are always already composite of multiple layers of history as fact and fiction, and therefore cannot be dismissed simply, as ideological screens to be peeled away to reveal a hidden truth. The truth is now embedded in the screen itself, something both true and false, or beyond truth and falsity. The screen retains and revises, it is a quasi-container of sorts, wherein the past as a chain of associations—whether “real,” imagined or felt—gathers its links into a forcible image-space, a veritable living spectral figure of the present. In this vein we could ask, are spirits such living “revisions,” composite layers of fiction and truth, or fiction in truth?

**Splitting Spaces: Favoring One Image While Working against Another**

In the practice of mediumship, I’m proposing, the dead return in imagistic scenes, closer to the stage-like spaces of childhood’s plastically visual memories, not far from the *inner theater* of the hysteric which Freud and Breuer wrote about in their earliest case studies—the hysteric already a mythical figure in her own right, as figure haunting the origin story of psychoanalysis (one that could never quite be put to rest).

What strikes me is that for spirit-images to return as *inner theaters*—that is, to re-surface—they must endure in the first place, as Freud remarked upon the “surprising” endurance of childhood memories. Is it owing to their plasticity as sensory milieus of full “hallucinatory” experiences that gives them the power to stick? For their hold on us is not merely of a memory, but as the re-presencing of something that exceeds thought or recollection. It is this characteristic of the revenant image, as a charged spatial and sensory milieu—an image you can enter into—that marks its endurance in repetition, the spirit as that which returns repeatedly from the dead.
What is called the “trance” state in mediumship is a state different from this heightened awareness of sensory images. Trance mediumship, as one Medium put it, is a “passive state of awareness, beyond clairvoyance.” In clairvoyant states, and this is the more commonly practiced form of mediumship, you remain semi-conscious, attending to the many images that flit up inside of you. Trance is “beyond communication,” and thus is beyond images: “if you stay with the pictures you will not go into trance” a Medium, one of my teachers, told me. The images must be cleared away. What takes their place is a more complete “blending” with the spirit that requires the deliberate passivity of the medium’s mind and body, a slowing of the breath and blood pressure, to the point of approximating “a state of sleep.”

You blend with something outside of you, the spirits are always “foreign” in this sense, they come from the outside, yet affect you on the inside. There is in practice, an inner marking off of the difference between self and spirit (as a practice of discernment referred to already), but also in the more extreme splitting that occurs in trance states, where the presence of the spirit requires the absence of the Medium. Here, the mental absence of the Medium is “proof” of the presence of a spirit. Another “proof” that one is truly entranced is found in the forgetting of the Medium. The Medium forgets what happened while the spirit was present, as we saw in William’s demonstration of transfiguration. “True mediumship is a form of entrancement,” I was told in at a lecture at Arthur Findlay College in London on trance mediumship, “in which you never remember the message.”

The Medium’s characteristic forgetfulness is taken as a sign of “evidence,” for a public, of a spirit’s presence—a sign of the foreign intrusion of the other within the mundane. There can be no contamination of the Medium’s psyche into that space of pure spiritual immediacy, it would seem, because any trace of the Medium’s overt agency is at odds with the very conditions
set up for spirit evidence. Namely, what makes it possible to give proofs or evidences of spirit presence, at least within the context of Spiritualist mediumship, is the capacity to discern and thus separate the Medium’s mundane consciousness from the spiritual voice or presence that enters in. This sign of a difference between spirit and medium has to do with the super-abundance of the spirit world as bringing us “knowledge and intelligence which we are normally unable to see,” as my teacher put it.

Or, as Rosalind Morris points out in her writing on spirit mediumship in Thailand, this forgetting is linked oppositionally, to the underlying idea that the “spirit has exceptional knowledge, as though an inverse relationship between spiritual knowing and mediatic retention were in place” (Morris 2015). And as I was told, trance “should demonstrate an intelligence extraneous to that of the medium.” In this forgetting, characteristic of what Spiritualists’ refer to as the deeper “trance” states of mediumship (as opposed to the semi-conscious states of communication) the Medium enters a state of non-thought that circumvents the attunement to images and sensations typical of mediumship. Morris draws out this “separation of psyches” of spirit and medium, and notes that this is primarily visible when the Medium speaks in the “foreign” tongue of the spirits, which she understands as functioning like a “buffer” that protects “its content from entering the medium’s own consciousness” (2015, 42). The Medium separates her “psyche” into two spaces, as much as two languages, which involves a “purifying of the space” of the spirit from the Medium’s own consciousness, “from which audience members would have to draw their truth.” The important question Morris asks is “why [is] noninterference” — the demarcation of a “purified” space of the spirit, as different from that of the Medium’s own psychic space—“necessary for pure presence” to present itself?
It is a question that goes to the heart of an iconoclastic inheritance I locate in modern Spiritualist mediumship, and to the story of North American settlement. Although here I ask this question with a slight difference—namely, what are the conditions whereby the purifications and clearings of space within settlement, and its iconoclastic imaginary, are expressed as a purified or cleared space within the body, a space where the (might) spirits appear? Given that spirits of Native Americans appear frequently to Mediums, especially in a decade coinciding with the removal of Native Americans from actual lands as a central moment in the story of settlements repeated clearings, what subtle dialectics of purification and spectralization are implicated in Mediumship? For one thing, the problem of spiritual discernment inhabits, I am saying, an iconoclastic division between inside and outside, where external images are banned at the same time that the body itself is treated as an image, raising the problem of what can appear as a sign of divinity, or spirit, and what must remain hidden or latent. And, as I have already suggested in Part 1., understanding the body as an image, as animate Shape, as the Puritans did, complicates the act of purification. For here, the body itself becomes a vessel of and for spectres—the center of mediation—where all other mediations, images, the magico-materiality of sacraments, confession etc. have been banned.

I would argue that we are dealing with the appearance of a “purified space,” to use Morris’ term, and not a pure space as such, to draw a distinction between something made through a repeated gesture, and something ontologically given. The practice of Mediumship, I am saying, requires the repeated gesture of laying-out a space within the body as container, to make room for something “foreign”, as immediate presence, to appear. The problem is, that the inner canvas of the body, as much as the land to be settled, is already occupied. In the practice of mediumship, in order to make room for the spirits, an inner canvas must be cleared of “clichés”
(Deleuze 2003)—the too recognizable ideas, imaginings or memories we have, devoid of the affective “quickenings” that belongs to the appearance of real spirits. Clearing a space for the spirits in mediumship means making oneself susceptible to another level of feeling, a feeling more foreign because it is attributed to an otherness beyond life. As in artistic practice, such a clearing of the canvas might be called an iconoclastic gesture, with the aim of making room for something else, something “true” to appear. Conversely, as an iconoclastic gesture of settlement, the clearing of land as a repetitive gesture in the revisionist history of terra nullius, is something very different—a violence that is manifest, yet little understood, for it deals in images as much as bodies.

More confusing still is the fact that trance mediumship is at once a purification of an inner space, an emptying out of inner images, and at the same time a “blending” with the spirit. So paradoxically, while a “purified” space of separation between the Medium’s consciousness and that of the spirit is the evidential sign of spirit presence, the practice itself is talked about and understood a technique of blurring, “blending” and “joining” the medium and spirit.

This splitting of two spaces within the Medium is not only, I would argue, visible as the maintenance of an evidentiary separation between the spirit and medium in trance states—it also pertains to how mediumship, as learned technique, involves making a space within oneself, demarcating an inner space for images and sensations of an “outside” to emerge, blend, and become discernible. This makes the practice of mediumship one of dissociation, which continuously plays with the problem of discernment of where one psyche ends and another begins, just as it draws out, what I will call, the displacement of the body itself: the body in its blending becomes a composite image of both medium and spirit: at once a spectral body and an enfleshed body, at once a body of the past and of the present.
To return to Freud, perhaps the analogy stands between the displacement of the “screen memory,” as it masks and hides a latent content, and the psyche of the Medium, hidden by that which overtakes her: by the spirit presences for which she becomes the vehicle. She must actively displace herself to make room for these foreign images, as if she herself embodies that force to which Freud ascribed a mysterious “purpose” behind the characteristic displacement of screen-memories: a purpose that “favors” one image while “working against another” (Freud 1990). The Medium’s practice of discernment is like favoring one image while “working against another,” insofar as she must work against the mundane images that occupy the sensorium to retain or preserve a space within her for spiritual images to appear, as children’s dreams do—that is, as inner theaters. Mediumship, whatever it is, addresses itself to this gap between the images of conscious life, manifest thought and desire, and images that affect us like a dream, providing an opening we can enter into: “plastic” inner-theaters as fully fledged sensory “experiences.” And, as Freud reminds us, the dream itself is the result of a prior conversion of a “thought” (or wish), to its “translat[ion] into the [hallucinatory] experience” (italics mine) of dream-time, the fulfillment of the wish. The gripping experience of dreaming, like the plastic visual memories of childhood, becomes in mediumship a waking experience—what Deleuze, referring to the hysteric called a “Vigilambulist” (Deleuze 2003, 43). But what marks the transition between thinking (what Freud also calls the wish) and the dream image, as those images gaining an animacy and staying power, the traction of affecting “experiences”? For such experiences fulfill something, or more precisely, are their own fulfillment. If mediumship could here be said to be a making-room, by displacing proximate conscious images, for the emergence of latent, and thus distant images—in this displacement, the dead-image becomes a living inner theater, by first passing through, and thus borrowing the sensory space of the body, to depict the form of
a distant spirit or scene. In a strange conversion of death to life, there is a clearing away of dead images that makes room for living images, as (un) dead spirits to become mediumistic “experiences.” But what then of settlements returns? If there is an analogy between the clearing of an inner space within the medium, and the clearings of settlement, as I have suggested, isn’t this logic of clearing accompanied, in mediumship, by an inverse operation, whereby the living Indian is removed (or killed), in order for the living-“dead” spectral Indian to appear?

2.4. Proximity and Distance

Finally, we turned to the subject of Indian guides and I asked M. what the role of Indian spirits is in Spiritualism.

M: Why would we have Indian guides now? They are all on reservations and we put them there! And they are guides to their own people! Why would they want to be our guides? They were guides back then when the movement started because there were Indians around then…Now, no one sees them around. These people who think they have Indians guides are sick. But back in the day they were with the Indians. Indians are spiritual and they turned to spirit in everything they did…they used the spirit to find the animals when they needed to hunt.

E: Do you think that is why Spiritualism started here, in North America, because of the Native Americans?

M: If it were it would have started in a reservation area… not in Hydesville!
She pauses and thinks. Now, we are so distant from them, why would they come around us? We’d be more likely to draw on a philosopher from the 19th century… But those people, [Spiritualists of the 19th century] were involved with the Indians, there was a proximity.

What did M. mean by proximity? Was she referring only to a geographic distance of the Indian to the “white” Spiritualist, of predominantly Anglo-European descent—now, no one sees them around—and this presumably because now, they are on reservations? Then again, when I asked why the inaugural events of Spiritualism, considered the revolutionary and cosmic opening of modern spirit communication should have begun in North America, and whether this has
something to do with Native Americans, M. simply reminds me that it all began in Hydesville; implying, I take it, that Spiritualism begins only after the Indian is already perceived at a distance, presumed to be in a reservation area, and thus demarcated spatially and spiritually, from a settler geography of New York. But then, what to make of the continuing sense, built up throughout our conversation, that the Indian is nevertheless still proximate, spiritually somehow even today—and this—despite history and despite the sense that they are geographically invisible? This puzzling play of distance and proximity is further troubled by the fact that the Seneca nation immediately borders the Cassadega Lake region where Lily Dale is located, and is a visible geographic presence to anyone travelling to Lily Dale from eastern New York, marked by the large casino one passes just off the highway. So, what to make of M.’s sense that at one time, at the beginning of the movement, Spiritualists were with the Indian, living somehow in proximity to them?

In M.’s words, the distance of the Indian to us today makes them unlikely guides, because, as I am told, the more a spirit recedes into the past, the less proximate the spirit is to us in terms of an immediate sense of lived kinship, and because such spirits often have “progressed” through spiritual spheres to an ascended height far beyond us earth bound spirits. This makes such spirits more abstract—and less likely to be interested in guiding folks on the earthly plane, for their “interests” align less with ours.

M: The stuff about, what’s his name, everybody’s got him coming through, St. Germaine and all that nonsense!…Those spirits, they are so elevated, they aren’t even touch in with the human plane, they are at such a high vibrational state, they can’t even come through the veil, they can’t get to that negative state of our heaviness, you know, so…actually I think the people that come to us now are people who passed away in the last 150 years ago, because they would still be concerned about projects here on earth. But once they start elevating spiritually, to where they no longer deal with anything material, they wouldn't come back.
On the other hand, what makes a guiding spirit an adequate “guide” is often attributed precisely to the spirit having “transcended” their particularity—historical, linguistic, cultural—having attained the status of an universal spirit. Guides are thus also thought of as “ascended” spirits, insofar as they have reached a higher spiritual plane and are no longer proximate to the earthly milieu of the Medium who draws them.

I found that among the more advanced Mediums, those who had spent years practicing and demonstrating their mediumship in Spiritualist centers, that “guides” were often mentioned but without much specificity. It seemed not to matter much who exactly one’s guide is, beyond a general sense, so much as to be certain that there are persons in the spirit world working with you. As M. herself put it, “I don't know who works with me cause I don’t believe in that guide business…” She rather emphasizes the “codes” one builds with whomever one “works with in spirit,” and less with the identity of the spirit worker. But guides do play a role as the mediating spirits who bring other spirits through to you, and many people will vaguely say, I have a guide who is a doctor, or an “Indian” or a scientist. I was told in a number of “readings” given to me by different Mediums, that I should think of my grandmother as a “guide,” for example—in which case the guiding spirit is not ascended, but traceable as a direct blood relative.

The idea of spiritual progression and elevation runs throughout Spiritualist history and thought. Progress is an integral term within the Spiritualist cosmology of the spirit’s journey from the embodied earth plane to the disembodied heavenly plane—“Summerland,” as it was referred to in the 19th century—where spirits continue to ascend through further planes, ordered hierarchically, mapping the soul’s progresses after death. The spirit world, like earth, is thus viewed as a continuous training ground, a place of learning where spirits who were once less “elevated” become more so.
What is interesting in the case of Indian spirits, is spiritual progression or elevation involves a movement by which actual figures of North American history, such as the often referred to guide, Sitting Bull, become *generalized* and de-contextualized spirit figures.

During my fieldwork, a Medium gifted a book to me telling me it was one that had helped her in her *development in mediumship*. The book, *Answers for an Enquiring Mind: Spiritual Teachings from White Feather*, first published in 1998, is a recent example of an older Spiritualist genre of writing in which the teachings of the “spirit” that come through, during trance, are recorded and transcribed in book form (1998). The medium, Robert Goodwin, an Englishman who has “demonstrated” his mediumship at the revered English Spiritualist institution in Stansted, reaching back to the mid-1900’s, the Arthur Findlay College, describes himself as a trance medium whose “main guide is White Feather who imparts philosophy and answers questions through me [italics mine]” (Goodwin 1998). His website explains that he has published six books alone on White Feather’s teachings. The Medium in training who gave me the book was convinced that she too had White Feather as her guide, because, after he had appeared to her while meditating, she continued to find white feathers in her path for weeks. Such is the trail of correspondences Mediums are always on the look out for — since spirits rarely speak directly but mostly through various “signs” and serendipitous encounters.

In Goodwin’s book of White Feather’s teachings, White Feather as a locatable Native person with a biography is nowhere to be found. There is no mention whatsoever, whether as lore or otherwise, of who White Feather was as a living “Indian,” from what tribal nation he hailed, or what moment in history this figure emerges from. Even the specificity, and thus significance, of the name “White Feather” is nowhere mentioned. In a format familiar to Spiritualists, the book is structured through a series of questions posed by an audience to the
Medium under trance, and the spirit of White Feather, through the mouth of Robert Goodwin, gives the answers. When asked, “Do you have a name,” White Feather answers: “It depends upon which level I am operating. The name which I could give you if you wish, is of little consequence because it is the teachings which I impart, rather than the personality, which I seek to convey to you. The name you can refer to me is White Feather. I have nothing more to say about myself other than I have lived upon our world and manifested many times upon your world through different cultures and races” (Goodwin 1998, 9,10). Even the name here seems to become a matter of indifference, emptied out of any specificity, racial, biographical or otherwise, as the spirit becomes increasingly universalized— that is, “progresses” so as to manifest “through different cultures and races.” The spirit becomes a de-localizable body, one that can manifest “many times upon your world” through “different cultures and races,” yet here, bearing the name White Feather, conjures the familiar image of a generalizable “Indian” spirit.

It is also important that White Feather’s response foregrounds his “teachings” in opposition to “the personality,” which echoes what I have referred to as the suspension of biography amongst mediums, not only vis-à-vis their clients (sitters), but also when in training together or simply conversing. It seemed almost taboo, during my years training to become a Medium, to speak too openly of one’s biographical details, particularly outside of the context of spiritual experiences, let alone to make such inquiries of others. Such a displacement of personal detail or orientation of one’s kinship is, however, in keeping with the traditional sense of the medium as instrument of transmission for the presence of spirit, as well as spirits’ teachings, which requires the pushing aside of her own personality, as I have described in demonstrations of trance states. Here, in the case of White Feather, recognition of the spirits power, ascendency and authenticity is likewise linked to a suspension of biographical detail, as if to be an ascendant
spirit, one who traverses “different cultures and races,” the spirit must become more general and thus more universalizable.

The decontextualized Indian can be everywhere and anywhere, while still representing, as “Indian,” an autochthonous spirituality. As one Spiritualist writing in 1940 put it, in considering why the Indians are spirit guides: “The Red Man has no temples nor shrines nor sanctuaries. Wherever he was, that place was where God was.” Drawing an analogy between the beliefs of Spiritualists in a universal God, a God manifested in Nature as “Infinite Intelligence,” and the “Great Spirit” worshipped by Indians, the author implicitly analogizes a vision of the free and nomadic American “Indian” to the placeless modernity of the modern white Medium, making the Indian the spiritual precursor to the Medium whose God is “wherever he” is (Harding 1940).

As I will later argue, the Medium embodies a certain spectral displacement: insofar as she makes visible the spectral hauntings of settlement and, insofar as the body, in mediating spirits, is made the place/non-place of an absent-presence. In this way, the body of the Medium is followed by the deterritorialized spirits of modern settlement—and here I mean both the spirits of those genocided by settlement and the settler’s own spiritual displacement—as one who never truly belongs to the land settled and for whom autochthony is always out of reach. Hence, the fantasy of borrowed autochthony, attained through converse with the spirit of the Indian, and, more generally, the endless paranoia and defensive position of the settler vis a vis the territory. For the Medium’s body, I am saying, as inheritor of settler logics, is followed by spirits no longer placed and accessed through sacred or autochthonous sites in the landscape, but appearing only in and through the placeless modern body—and this as a solution of sorts, for the existential displacement(s) of modernity. The Medium makes visible an ontological condition of the modern body as a sensitive instrument, always already haunted by invisible forces, affects and spirits.
While the very presence of Indian spirits at séances, particularly as “general” and “forgiving” spirits, performs an avowal of a disturbing presence of what is there—namely, a spectral inheritance of settlements violence—this occurs within an overwhelming and repeated disavowal of living Native peoples and their proximity to the world the settler imagines to have settled.

All this talk about guides... It's silly all these people running around looking for the names of their guides! Like when someone says who is your guide?

A common question among Mediums.

I know an Indian that was with me as a child... and I didn’t know who it was... and when I went to my first mediumship class in Cassadega, [the sister camp to Lily Dale, formed after the first camp in New York and located in Florida] there on the wall was a picture of an Indian in the room we were in. And my teacher said 'M. is this your guide?' And I said, “I don’t know but I know he is around me.” And all I know is that since I was a little girl I was Indian crazy! My whole room is full of Indian artifacts, since I was little. They [the Indians] are so spiritual! Everything they do is attached to spirit—they don’t waste food, they are so attuned to nature—what is God? She suddenly looks me directly in the eye and pauses...Nature! The Indian in the picture that day was Sitting Bull. And I have a big picture of him in my office... but I don’t tell anyone that. You know, because I don’t want people saying “she thinks that is her guide.” But I know he is there for a purpose. And I support the Indian schools... and I work with getting people to donate stuff to the reservation... she pauses again and thinks... its just there.

M. discards as necessary knowing one’s guides and doubts the proximity of Native American spirits to us, but also—leaving unarticulated the history—asks why they would come to us? Why would they want to be our guides? And despite her suspicion about Indian guides in general, she has felt the presence of a particular Indian spirit, and throughout her life has been “Indian crazy”—a crazyness not so much of a desire to play Indian, but to somehow claim something more inward, a spiritual affinity between herself and an Indian spirit. This spiritual affinity to Indian spirits is described as an ongoing communication realized and acknowledged, in the inaugural moment of one’s mediumship, as having been there all along. M.’s experience is in keeping with the role of the Indian spirit as a mover across thresholds, a gatekeeper “between worlds”— the earthly and the spirit plane—making the Indian the first spirit one is visited by,
and with whom one feels a strange affinity. Moreover, it is the liminal Indian as guide that protects the Medium from “lesser” spirits who might be up to no good; it is the *earthy* and *earthly* Indian spirit that paves the way for “higher” spirits to enter into communion with the Medium.

And here, in M.’s account, there is an Indian who insists, whose presence she felt despite herself—“I know he is around me.” Yet she regards *all this talk* about guides in general with suspicion—given the distance of the present day Spiritualist community to actual Native Americans—a distance, itself wrapped up in the belief in a prior proximity, *a time before*, when “back in the day they were *with* the Indians.” As though, in keeping with a tensive proximity and distance, the central importance of the Indian guide is maintained and simultaneously disavowed, as coalescing in the image of M.’s *big poster* of Sitting Bull kept in her office at home, hidden from the eyes of her public, which she “doesn’t tell anyone about.”

*It is just there*, as M. said, the connection to Native American spirits, or to Native American spirituality as autochthonous—*they are so spiritual!*—a spirituality re-claimed by the Spiritualist, or so the narrative goes. It seems it is not, or not only, the settler’s imagination of Native American spirituality that is here at play—not only a matter of appropriation—but opens onto what I’m calling a particular *North American spiritual geography of settlement*. Spiritualists’ communication with “Indian” spirits, spirits who occupy the inaugural threshold of North American spirit communication, must be seen as constitutive of a spiritual geography of settlement, of settlements claimed and disclaimed affinities.
Indians at the Séance

The 1870’s marked the “decade of the spirit Indian,” according to Robert S. Cox; during this the Indian was a dominant presence at séance tables throughout North America (Cox 2003). What is remarkable about this surge in Indian spectres at the séances tables of white Spiritualists, is the fact of their appearance directly after the Civil War. It was not the dead soldier that returned, those lost to the fratricidal and thus familial war—but the Indian. As Cox put it, for “white Americans turning away from carnage and fratricide (Spiritualist or not)” the “wartime dead passed into silence” (Cox 2003, 233-234). The equally remarkable silence that followed the soldiers fallen in the Civil War was supplanted by the mostly peaceful and conciliatory voices of Indians in the séance room. The Indian “shades” that presented themselves in the séance room outnumbered even the closest kith and kin; Indian spirits, in the “decades following the Civil War […] grew so numerous that they supplanted fathers, mothers, sisters, or brothers as the stereotypical spirit guide” (Cox 2003, 190). What to make of this fact? The fact that at the very moment when the “vanishing Indian” is “rued (or celebrated)” in “novels, plays, poetry and song […]” Indians became ever more visible as spirits? (Cox 2003,190)

How striking, that a nation in mourning should not be preoccupied with the dead soldiers lost within the immediate family ring, but with the return of the spirits of the removed Indian, and this in the wake of the Indian Wars of 1863. And particularly striking, since it would seem the appearance of “Indians” and other more distant spirits—often the subaltern spirits of North American settlement or European empire, including spirits of the “orient,” etc. could not provide the kind of demonstrable evidences the Medium communicates in order to prove the “continuity of life” to her audience. In my observation, today, most of the spirits the Medium communicates with during mediumistic demonstrations are close family members, mostly blood relatives, at
least in part because the object of a *demonstration*, as Spiritualists call it, is to give the recipient evidential and thus biographical “information” about the spirit, information that can be verified by the recipient. The demonstration should prove that the Medium is in contact with a familiar and thus often, familial spirit. Although, it often seemed to me that such proofs are as much about offering a bit of information—the age, description or way the person died—as about the affective resonance created between Medium and sitter, when a Medium chooses *the right words said in the right way* to describe the spirit person. A simple resonant phrase or the attitude of the spirit conveyed affectively, that is, through the Medium, is often more convincing to the recipient than straight-up biographical “facts.” Here, in the case of Indian appearances, however, with kinship so far removed, such distant and generalized spirits could not have been “demonstrative” or “evidential” to their audience in the same way.

The calling of the Indian spirit to the “séance tables of the present,” argues McGarry, was a “destabilizing” act vis-à-vis the narrative of “the disappearance of the Indian so central to Anglo-American justifications of succession” (McGarry 2008, 73). The fact of Indian “liveness,” as animate, spectral presences, McGarry seems to argue, contrasts with the tropes of nostalgic and melancholic lament for the vanished Indian so prevalent in antebellum literature and political discourse. That the spectral Indian is, after all, included in the circle of the living is a mark “distinctive of Spiritualist Reform”: namely, “the enmeshment of spectral Indians in Spiritualist practice” (McGarry 2008, 81). Whereas abolitionists pointed to the “broken treaties with native nations” as a “breach of the social contract” that troubled America’s “enlightened vision of itself,” Spiritualists, in their contact with Indian spirits, “extended this contract as an ongoing negotiation between this world and the next” (McGarry 2008). Thus, in response to the massacres occurring in the western plains, McGarry shows that Spiritualists belief in the
continuity of life extended their social contract with Indians in the afterlife, and thus their responsibility to aid living Indians in this life: “You can all do something, and rest assured that if you do not, the consequences you can not escape hereafter. [...] Die you must; and because you must die you will enter the spirit world; and what then? Those opposed ones, black and red, may come to you, individually, asking what you have done for their people here. See to it that you can give them a good answer [italics mine]” (McGarry 2008, 93). This echoes much of what Spiritualists central to the movement, such as Emma Hardinge Britten, say about the afterlife as a place of reckoning, where one finds oneself face to face with every spirit in particular, that one has wronged in this life—with “clouds of witnesses,” to our sins. The spirits witness our every action and even our thoughts in this life—making us responsible, not only to a vague or distant God, but to the many individual persons wronged in this life. The reverb of personal responsibility, and an individual accounting for one’s sins in the hereafter, again, seems to put in relief Spiritualisms Protestant inheritances, while the focus on a confrontation with “races” of spirits, “black and red” places Spiritualism within an imaginary of settlement.

At the same time, it seems that while Indian spectrality in some way articulated Spiritualists’ vision of a new social contract, one based in a unity of spiritual bodies linked in sympathy and extending across thresholds of life and death, Native and settler—it still served to displace the “breach of contract” in this life onto a fulfillment of the social contract in the next, where Indian spirits would be returned their lands in spectral form, to live forever on their “happy hunting grounds”—a vision of Native heaven which increasingly (after the Civil War) maintained a vision of racial segregation in the next life in the form of an “apartheid of the spheres” (Cox 2003).

20 Here McGarry is quoting a Banner of Light editorialist.
There is a distinction made in these histories of Spiritualism, between the antebellum Indian spirits, and those Indian spirits that occupy the séance rooms from the 1860’s into the 1870’s, the “decade of the spirit Indian” (Cox 2003). McGarry notes that Indian spirits appearing at séance gatherings of the 1850’s, shortly after the founding moment of Spiritualism at Hydesville in 1848, appeared, not due to their proximity (geographic or otherwise) to those that would call on them, but already as “members of a vanished people” hailing from a geographic and temporal elsewhere” (McGarry 2008, 70). As such “Indian ghosts” of the 1850’s were always already “dispossessed and displaced from this world and replaced in the next,” partaking in the popular literature of the “vanishing” Indian popularized during Jackson’s Removal Acts of the 1830’s (McGarry 2008, 70). However, by the 1860’s Spiritualist reformers in the Northeast became increasingly occupied with the “militant rhetoric of the Plains Indians and other Western tribes doing battle with the U.S. government and individual settlers” (McGarry 2008). While McGarry points to more troubling Indian voices, and gives a few examples of less conciliatory spirits, whose anger, however, seems mostly attenuated and reconciled in the end, this contrasts with Cox’ claim that in antebellum America “discussion of the reconciliation of personal animosities assumed a cardinal importance in Spiritualist literature” and even the most militant “of living Indians, a veritable Black Hawk, was softened in the spirit world.” Where once “pale-faced spirits found little welcome at his council-fire,” this repentant warrior now welcomed all with open arms and spiritual gifts” (Cox 2003, 200).

The intwinelement within Spiritualism of colonial logics and 19th century reform, led Spiritualists to debate the “Indian question” during the summer 1868, at their annual summer camp meeting in Lily Dale, New York, after which Spiritualists “continued to organize for Indian rights and other reforms throughout the 1870s” (McGarry 2008). These reform initiatives
included writings by Spiritualists in Spiritualist presses which, McGarry notes, “had indeed, been one of the earliest and often the lone progressive voice on the Indian question,” taking to task “The New York Tribune, Times, Sun, and Herald, for their unfair reporting” (2008, 92). Thus during the summer of 1868 Spiritualists invited a Native American speaker who “resided on a very near ‘reservation,’” Dr. P. Wilson, “originally descended form the famous Six Nations,” to give a speech. Dr. Wilson, outlining the similarities between “native Indian’s theology” and Spiritualists beliefs, said: “Indians all believe in one Great Spirit, and that human spirits come right from this Great Spirit…We neither know of nor believe in any death, for we live right on… Spirits continually come back. We all believe this. I expect when I get through this world to go to the hunting-grounds of my ancestors” (McGarry 2008, 93). However, Dr. Wilson then went on to disturb the Spiritualists view that their causes and ends are one and the same: “None of us desire to go to the Christian Heaven! Why should we? They’d turn us out if possible,” emphasizing a distinct separation between white Spiritualism and Native American interests, even in the hereafter. Spiritualists were “quickly disabused,” says McGarry, of “their fantasy of a Native American Spiritualist” (2008, 93). Even so, and even given the entanglement of reform initiatives within Spiritualist practices, “living Native Americans” were continuously elided ‘in favor of Indian spirit guides.”

This is a cursory picture of the conflicting actions and attitudes of 19th century Spiritualists in their occupation with Indian spirits, and mostly points to a spectral appropriation of Indians as spiritual predecessors, and thus authenticators, of a white American settler spirituality, while also perhaps, disturbing simple “succession” narratives by the sheer fact that such “lively” spectral presences—even in their vague and general figuration—had the effect of mobilizing Spiritualist reform efforts (McGarry 2008, 68).
The *distance* within which white Spiritualist, mostly on the east coast where the movement began, perceived their relation to living Indians, in some sense made possible their spectralization. In other words, the absence of lived relations to living Indians—and thus the absence of the actual body (of the “Indian”) at the séance table, opens a gap through which spectral Indians are called to appear. Whatever this space of negotiation is—a space of appropriation, as imagined reconciliation, as a warning to the present of continued injustices against actual Indians—it is the configuration of a strange space in which, at the very least, the actual body is confronted by a host of spectres usurped from the land occupied by the settler/Medium. And this confrontation, is further made strange by the fact that the many Indian spirits returning, even those retaining specific personae such as Sitting Bull, Black Hawk, or, “among the earliest recorded”, the figure of chief Powhatan in New Hampshire séance in 1853, make themselves heard by borrowing the voice of the white, mostly female, Medium, that is, in and through the medium of her body (McGarry 2008, 68). The significance of Powhatan’s appearance, as one of the earliest recorded, speaks to the role of geographic and temporal distance in the mediation of Indian presence. Powhatan, McGarry notes, appears “200 years after his death in an Anglo Spiritualist drawing room,” as a the “leader of thirty to thirty-five Algonquian-speaking tribes,” hailing from “what is now Virginia,” and would have been known to 19th century Spiritualists as the father of Pocahontas, from the “tales” of Captain John Smith in his settlement of Jamestown (2008, 69).

What to make of this play of proximity and distance of the Indian spirit to Spiritualists’, both during the mid to late 19th century and still today, considering M.’s ambivalent talk around Indian guides? M., we will recall, spoke of Indian guides as both somehow *distant* from present day Spiritualists, not only, I take it, in the sense of geographic distance, but in terms of a distance
of desire, as in: “why would they want to talk to us now?” And, at the same time, M. conveyed a sense of the continued proximity of Indian spirits, speaking of a spiritual affinity—or what Cox calls a sympathy—as felt by the nascent medium in her earliest memories of spirit contact in childhood: I was Indian crazy. All this further begs the question, what do Spiritualists’ want from the spirits of Indians? Is there something geographic and spatial determining what spirits “come through” at a given time in history, as M. had intimated, then what to make of the continuing presence, albeit less frequent today than what is recounted of the 19th century, of the Indian at North American séance tables?

2.5. A Séance at the Doctor’s House

I first met the Doctor one summer in Lily Dale and we talked over tuna melts at a nearby diner. He was kind, humorous and invited me to attend a “physical circle” that meets every week at his house. The Doctor tells me that when he first encountered mediumship and got his first reading, while still in High School, he thought to himself “if he can do it I should be able to do it… or if it’s a trick, I want to be able to do it!.” He was amazed at the messages given to him that first time, thought it was a “cool trick.” It wasn’t until his second-year of mediumistic training that he had, what he calls his “aha moment”:

we were called to the front to give messages, and this woman scratched her nose and caught my eye. Suddenly, in a download moment a couple of memories came to me! So I’m in a download, and I see in my mind’s eye, in my mental imagery the image of a capital building lit up at night… and then me playing with army dolls when I was little…And I said, “oh my God! There is no trick!” Or, the “trick is the mental imagery!” It was like… this aha moment… to realize that you are not seeing physically but seeing mentally, that is, clairvoyantly… and so I continued to take classes in development and refined it… Of course nobody ever feels totally comfortable with it, and if you don’t… well your on the right track… if you do feel comfortable… well, then it’s a trick! And I still feel amazed, after 40 years! Though still, even as a Medium you sometimes question: is it all in my head?
I’d never heard this phrase before, “in a download moment,” but it is keeping with the technological metaphors used traditionally to describe mediumistic practice—the spiritual telegraph become computerized in this updated metaphor of downloading, as a description of the way “information,” mostly in the form of sense and image, pours in during mediumship. It was also interesting to me that the Doctor, who really is a practicing medical Doctor and a Medium, described mediumship as a “trick,” until his “aha moment” when he felt and saw inwardly, in a stream of clairvoyant images, which seems to have transformed his sense of mediumship from simply a “trick,” to an experience—and this was all the more interesting given his interest in physical mediumship, as opposed to mental clairvoyance, so notorious for “tricks” of legerdemain.

The Doctor has been “sitting” in a regular “circle” for 5 years now. Enthusiastically he told me: “I feel its time to bring physical mediumship back to Lily Dale.” His enthusiasm had been newly charged by a recent experience, albeit in sitting with a different group at the Dale. In this group, though they had only been sitting for a few weeks, “the trumpet moved! And moved across the table! And out of thin air a voice was speaking…” For 44 years I’ve been sitting in a circle and none of this! In this circle of five years, tiny things have happened, but they were sitting for one day and this! But it strengthened his resolve for the possibilities of something happening in his own group. So, you know, we are hoping we are going to make some breakthroughs…

The group that meets is made up of ten people who seem to be between fifty and seventyish, and live in or around the Dale throughout the year—they are not, in other words, summer visitors. I was welcomed into a darkened séance room, just off the main living room. You
immediately entered upon a circle of chairs and just to the right off the circle was a dark cabinet, curtained on four sides and with a large antique looking arm-chair inside the boxed-off space.

As we sat there the Doctor and his regulars welcome the guests—he had invited a few other non-regulars to attend that evening—the Doctor explained that they have gotten some phenomena recently: the sound of chimes ringing, all kinds of lights passing through the air and someone’s shoes glowing, as well as direct voice phenomena. Direct voice occurs when the spirits voice can be heard without the use of a mediating “living” voice-box—that of a Medium. An elderly woman had brought her trumpet along, and explained how recently she had been sitting with a smaller group when the trumpet began “tipping” and flew off the table into her lap. As she spoke she made a swaying movement with her body, her body acting as the lumbering trumpet that teetered toward her as she was now, teetering toward me. Another woman presented what she called a “ghost radar machine,” something with a screen graphing green frequencies, and would occasionally emit random words like “china” or “copper” that were somehow supposed to be indicative of ghostly presences. Throughout this preparatory phase there was much talk about what, in the way of physical phenomena, had occurred at previous séances, and the Doctor mentioned he had once seen a table fly through the air at a séance in Spain!

To commence, the lights were turned off with the exception of a small infrared light. Suddenly a young man, perhaps in his early twenties, walked into the room and without a word, sat inside the cabinet. This young man was later introduced, by the Doctor, as a developing physical medium, a kind of battery whose energy, the Doctor hoped, would charge the séance and give us more phenomena. We sat in the circle, with a card table at the center and Doctor said an opening prayer asking for spirit to come through us and into our midst. After which, the regular 10 attendees present were invited to sit at the card table in the center of the larger circle,
their fingers resting gently on its edges. As is customary, we began with some singing to “raise
the vibration.” A little “rock of Abraham,” followed by some “Om shanti shanti,” You’ll be
coming around the Mountain and You are my sunshine” and another song which someone said
was “Lakota.”

After much singing someone suggested we “try out” the trumpets. Four trumpets were
placed on the table. Continuously the spirits were asked for advice on how best to facilitate
communication, and whatever subtle messages people were receiving were followed as
instructions from the spirits world—even something as seemingly minor as what song to sing
next. The trumpet also had fluorescent tape at the base and on top, and sometimes two bands in
the middle, so they could be located in the dark. At a crescendo moment, the Doctor played a
song from one of the Harry Potter films, very loudly while we were all encouraged to close our
eyes and concentrate our energy on getting the trumpets to fly. Intermittently, we were asked to
hold our hands out in a kind of Evangelical style, and send our energy to the trumpets!

After more singing and sitting, I began to shift a little in my chair. Someone abruptly
yelled out “Did you hear that tap?” At which point they turned to me and said, “she has spirit
light around her!” But I explained that it was only my glow in the dark watch, and was “politely”
asked to cover it up lest it interfere further.

Interjections heard while sitting in the dark:

“I see a green face darting across the trumpets!”

“I see E.T.’s [Extra Terrestrials] between and around them!”

“I feel cold air around my neck… my head, my hands etc.”

“There is a lot of activity around the Cabinet!”
Then “Ho Ho” made his appearance as the Doctor went into trance. Some guttural sounds, and the Doctor’s voice suddenly became deeper, as Ho Ho began to speak through his mouth: “Howw!” Everyone replied “Howw!” and then Ho Ho laughed and said, “this is how we say Hi!”

Ho Ho explains that we must keep trying to make the trumpets move, and that we would soon be visited by another spirit, “Harry the Hairdresser… so if you feel your hair stand on end, or some weird energy around your head, you will know who it is!” Everyone laughs at this. Ho Ho says he himself prefers to “tickle” your nose or in general, make you itch somewhere on your body. “There are some who may doubt… it is always difficult when a group changes, but we must be patient…”

The minstrel Indian speaking a pidgin English is shocking to hear—it is such a throwback, a trope of a trope, of the manner in which Indian spirits appeared to early Spiritualists, conveying an uncanny out-of-placeness, mixed with nostalgia, in the present context. Until this moment, I had only heard of Spiritualists talking about their Indian guides, or mentioning vaguely “the spirituality of the Indian,” but never had I heard an “Indian” spirit speak! And in ventriloquizing the’ white man’s’ idea of an Indian spirit—what kind of mimickery is this? Where, as Robert Cox put it, in the spirit Indian’s “mimicking of white men mimicking red-speak,” in performances of “long and tragic soliloquies on the demise of the race, and […] noble critiques of the dominant (white) political culture,” the returned spirits of Indians at the séance table “wallowed in two centuries of “the white man’s Indian” (2003, 191).

Ho Ho was clearly meant to amuse, to be the joker, as well as the conductor, for the group of spirits that appeared, judging from his repeated attempts to draw laughter from the circle who
were eager to oblige. The fact that Ho Ho was the first spirit to appear, places him in the expected role of Indian spirits as guides and gatekeepers, appearing at the opening of the séance to introduce and filter the appearance of other spirits. The other spirits that appeared were Lin Xu, who to my mind sounded more Russian than Chinese, and enigmatically told us that he “is representative of a collective of spirits, a collective consciousness that began appearing in the group.” Like Ho Ho, Lin Xu asked us if we had any questions and I found myself speaking up, to ask who belonged to this collective of spirits mentioned. The collective, Lin Xu answered, in his slow and halting way, is composed of the spirits of those in this room and their guides, but since the group changes there are also “subtle shifts,” in his (Lin Xu’s) energy. Lin Xu is thus a composite of the group’s energy, which is itself spectrally doubled by the spirits who guide each individual in the group. A band of spirits could be imagined as connected by a tether to the band of people seated in a circle, all creating a collective circular energy charge that forms the figural presence of Lin Xu, through the body of the entranced Doctor.

A woman then asked Lin Xu what we can do to increase the chances of getting the trumpets to move—a common question at the séances I have attended, insofar as the first spirit to appear often gives advice on conducting the best conditions for the appearance of further phenomena. To this, Lin Xu answered, we should bathe the trumpets in sacred water… and bless the sacred water with words. What followed was a whole meditation on the power of words to “declare” the sacred—and thus create what is declared. Lin Xu used an example of “studies” conducted on the effects of “chanting over a glass of water” and how such chanting changes the vibration but also the properties of the water.

After about an hour we broke for cookies and tea, but before we could leave our seats we were asked, moving around the circle one by one, to state our name. The lights still off, everyone
said their name, and this, we were told, ensured that no one would remain “stuck in trance” and thus be shocked when the lights came on. During the break, I noticed a woman washing the trumpets in the sink with water, as the spirits had instructed.

The final spirit to appear was little Francis. A polite sounding feminine voice is heard, the voice of a young girl (through the mouthpiece of the Doctor still in trance) who had been introduced by Ho Ho as coming to us from the 19th century. She informs us “it would be good to include “crystals” in the room with the trumpets. They (the spirits), she tells us, are working on bringing us physical phenomena, which involves converting energy from the outside—a kind of cosmic energy—into the physical… the energy out there into the physical in here.

The entire time the strange young man remained seated, without a sound, in the cabinet with the curtain.

Afterward I asked the Doctor if he could remember anything of what happened while he was in trance. It is like waking up from a dream… I have a sense of what happened, but not fully. It is like coming out of a fog. He then reminded me, enigmatically, that Lin Xu had taught us something… that words can transform things.

I asked him where Ho Ho was from: *he came from a now disappeared tribe at the edges of Western Michigan*. Ho Ho, he explained, is mostly a funny figure, like *spirit comic relief*.

During the séance the Doctor had given myself and another women, also not part of the regular group, a message: that we would both “do automatic writing, or inspired writing”… and that we are both presently “working on books.” A message that wove us outsiders into the net of spiritual practitioners—the outside researcher “working on books” would not be writing with the
I didn’t know what to make of all this. Did the regulars believe in these performances of what seemed like blatant chicanery, the performance of such clichéd and raced personas? And what to make of the fact that the Indian spirit of Ho Ho, the name itself not even culled from history’s actual “Indians” but reduced to a Red-face stage name? Was this performance of the “white man’s Indian” taken as a sign by white Spiritualists of authenticity, that is, of an authentically present spirit? And would this authenticity lie in proportion to Ho Ho’s conformity with older Spiritualist tropes of Indian appearances—even down to the role of providing the séance with “comic relief,” as the Doctor mentioned? Or was Ho Ho’s appearance something the others, those who themselves are Spiritualists, regarded secretly as just play, with a wink and a nod? The enthusiasm of the regulars was clear—at the appearance of each of these spirits, there was a welcoming hush and much laughter and excitement after each of the spirits’ utterances. Was this performed only for the benefit of us, the non-regulars in attendance? I doubted it, for while this was surely part of the story, this particular group, permanent residents of Lily Dale and its surrounds, had been sitting every week for five years, each time for hours in the dark waiting…a waiting presumably punctuated by the self-same appearance of these familiar spirits speaking through the entranced Doctor: Ho Ho the Indian, Lin Xu the Chinese wise man, and Francis the little Victorian girl. And, if the Chinese spirit teaches us something, as the Doctor put it, something about the power of words to declare and thus create the sacred, as if pointing to the meta-pragmatics of spirit speech—the ‘felicitous conditions’ whereby a word declared, pragmatically enacts the very thing it declares—what is enacted by the voice of Ho Ho? What kind of sacred is enacted by the appearance of the spectral Indian, precisely as an unquestioned and expected presencing of the “white man’s Indian”?
The Liminal Indian

A well-known medium, Mavis, visiting from the Arthur Findlay College in England gave a talk at Lily Dale one summer. Standing before the podium of the small Assembly Hall where I had seen William seated the previous summer, his face ectoplasmically transfigured, this smallish elderly woman appeared now with a twinkle in her eye and a little dry humor in her words, like everyone’s favorite English granny. She told her captive audience, of mostly Medium’s in training, that both the spirit and the Medium grow together, and what is more, that both have doubts about the possibilities of communication. “If the Medium handles something well, they [the spirits] will go to the Medium for that again, so there must be people in the spirit world saying “oh my God is it going to work?” They have something they want to communicate to the living, and so they go to the medium they believe will best be able to communicate that message. As Mavis put it, “the spirits follow us.”

“They are people without bodies, but they are still people!” she reminded us, “they may not do very well at times, with me, or you… but that is part of their training.” When messages fail to come through the Medium with clarity, which often happens—Mavis’ reference to “not doing very well” having to do with the spirit’s ability to communicate with the medium—the “people in the spirit world” will learn from this failure and find another way to make the communication clearer. The spirits come to trust the medium, the less she distorts their communication: “they have to feel their previous memories are safe with us and we won’t change them. If a little old lady [in spirit] is bringing you a box of treasures, we can’t destroy those previous memories! If we destroy them are we worthy?” There is mutual room for improvement between the Medium and the spirit, and, as Mavis tells us, the spirit will bring the information “again and again” if it is important to them. As an older Spiritualist, a man named
Tim who has lived almost his entire life one the grounds of Lily Dale, told me in referring to spirit guides: They go to the people that they really want to work with...the more spiritual the medium, the better quality of guide you will attract, guides of a higher level. And this, Tim explained, because there are different kinds of guides of different qualities. You want a good gate keeper that is going to protect you and protect what comes in.

A key aspect of learning and thus progression in the spirit world, involves the mediation of the Medium, who “heals” the spirits. As Mavis put it, “we heal two worlds as Mediums.” Because the spirits are “ordinary people” we must “take care of the spirit world: “they need your compassion and understanding… like ordinary people they have often been traumatized by life… they may not be able to say much, but give them twelve months and they will be able to say more…” With time, the spirits evolve and change in the spirit world, because “they have a life there, a life beyond death.” The Medium, by “touching in” with the “mental, ethereal and astral” planes of everyday life, heals the gap between the spirit plane and the earth plane. The spirits are healed insofar as the Medium stands in, to help them complete what they left undone or unsaid in life; as in cases when the spirit “isn’t very nice,” and must “recognize their mistakes” through their “need to communicate” with those they have hurt, in order to “heal and move on.” Often, the sitter can’t forgive the spirit who harmed them while living, and “that is alright because the spirit can still learn, for in touching the Medium, the spirit can touch the family even if they can’t be forgiven.” And healing works both ways, for the Medium, in acting as a healing bridge on behalf of the spirits to the living is also healed, thus spirit communication is thought to aid her own spiritual growth and “progression.”

At the end of her talk people were excitedly milling around Mavis as we left the building. Despite her small stature, and being surrounded by people, she suddenly, apropos of nothing,
approached me and said, “You, darling, are going to feel better.” She called everyone darling, but you still felt in that moment it was just for you. “You're a bit pale now, but soon you will be feeling stronger,” and with those words hanging in mid air, she turned away to speak with the many practitioners wishing to ask her questions. Her words had resonated, as a Medium’s words should, uncannily catching the right moment and the right time—I had been feeling very sad that day, due to things happening in my life at the time.

The Medium who does well will be approached by more and more spirits—she will be sought out in the spirit world, as one who can bridge and heal worlds. The Medium, I want to say, is the center of a triangle, triangulating a bridge between the living and the dead. If the Medium often facilitates forgiveness on behalf of the spirit, to those they hurt while living, the presence of Native American spirits at the séance table makes the Indian the first Medium, or intercessor, on behalf of the white Medium seeking reassurance of forgiveness from the Indian. The importance here of the Indian spirit as a condition for North American Spiritualist mediumship is not to be underestimated. For it is the Indian that embodies a spectral threshold, I want to say, through which the past and future of the nation is reconciled—that is, in and for, the imagination of the settler—but also is the joining of a spiritual geography of the past to a distinct vision of a new spiritual cosmos as distinctly American future.

After all, it is the Indian spirit, particularly in the 19th century, who is understood as acting on behalf of the Medium, and are foremost granted the role of maintaining the boundary to the realm of the dead, filtering what spirits will be let through to communicate with the Medium. It is the Indian spirit who first paves the way of communication with a host of other spirits. The Indian is a guide, because the Indian is a gatekeeper, the first spirit one calls upon to bring through other spirits. While no one will say there are “evil” spirits (Spiritualists remove the
question of theodicy altogether) it is often said there are “lesser” spirits—spirits whose aim it is to trick the living with communications that lead them astray, spirits that don’t speak the truth. This ambiguity is in some sense bridged by the Indian spirit, who only “lets through” the higher spirits. At the same time, Indian spirits seem often cast as comic relief, and sometimes as trickster spirits who perhaps unintentionally deceive, owing more to their “less civilized” status than a malicious intent.

As bridge and thus guide, the Indian was mostly cast as a healer of mind and body. Indian spirits as healers and physicians, drew on the idea that the Indians “were the finest naturopaths” and presumed a “sympathy” between Indian spirits and the white bodies they would heal, for it is through a “chain of sympathy between the medium and patient,” that spirit physicians and healers could cure the patient, thus taking on their disease (Cox 2003,197).

The role of healing in contemporary Spiritualist practice is central, while often considered distinct from the more “mental” mediumship practiced in the giving of messages etc. In healing, energy is channeled more directly through the body of the Medium. And it should be noted that not all Mediums are considered healers in the physical sense; while their messages might heal the rift between the living and the dead, a Medium must have a particular body suited to conducting “healing energy.” Thus at Lily Dale, and in the Spiritualist Churches I have attended, there are voluntary healing sessions where healers (often also Mediums, though there are also healers who are not practicing Mediums) pass their hands over the patients head, shoulders and chest—sometimes the rest of the body, depending on what area ails the patient. These passes recall Mesmer’s hypnotic passes across the body, hands hovering but not touching the patient, while conducting flows of magnetic “fluid” or energy between bodies. In Spiritualist healing, these magnetic fluids are now considered spiritual energy that heals the body and mind.
of the recipient. Such healing practices do not, in my experience, draw upon the spirits of Indians specifically, nor is it necessary to make explicit who one is “working with” in spirit, for such healing energies to be transmitted; more emphasis seems to be paid to the healing energy passing between bodies, than to a particular spiritual agency. This is not the case in the trance healing I have witnessed, however, where the Medium will work with a “team” in the spirit world, often composed of a team of spirit doctors—again, not necessarily Indian spirits—who work through the Medium while in trance to heal a patient.

To return to the role of Indian spirit as healer, Cox points out that their role as “physicians” does not concern only physical pain but also is directed at social ills. “Indian spirits manipulated both physiological and social sympathy […] if there was an Indian medical specialty during the 1860’s and 1870’s, it was the treatment of the social malady of racial animosity” (2003, 198). As figures of racial reconciliation, as well as vague figures of “peace,” the Indian is charged with forgetting the violence of settlement, and working for the harmony of the nation. However, “Indian behavior in the afterlife was not, in fact, always productive of racial harmony,” Cox adds, quoting the Christian Spiritualist Eugene Crowell, who attributed “most murders in the mortal world” to the instigation of “the spirits of slain or starved Indians,” who hovered about and influenced the more “mediumistic” mortals to commit crimes in order to “gratify their revengeful feelings upon the pale faces”” (2003, 205). Still, it would seem that for the most part, while Indian spirits in the 19th century carried some of their history with them, if only as already quasi-fictional, yet historical personages of popular American literature, today they appear even less “distinct,” and thus as only as generalized, and amicable, Indians. Still prevalent today, however, is the Indian as a figure healing, of bridging past and future, and of working closely with the Medium.
Mostly, the Indian guide seems to appear to the Medium in the initial stages of her mediumship by healing, communicating, and assisting in the trafficking between spiritual bodies and earthly bodies. As intercessor between spiritual and earthly planes, the Indian spirit is, as I have said, a healer of living “white” bodies, and thus a spectral body healing a fleshly body. Indeed the proximity between medium and the controlling spirit, is so intimate that one Indian spirit, Red Jacket speaking through the body of the Medium C.T. Buffum, describes his “communion with mortals as entering a “community of sensation” (Cox 2003). Using the organs of the Medium to see, speak and hear, the spirit and the Medium become “blended” and “in effect, they become a single, extended being, a reciprocal self” (Cox 2003). Cox calls this a “sympathetic rapport” between medium and spirit, and describes it as a “holistic sharing of body, mind and soul,” noting that such sympathies differ from “playing Indian,” in Deloria’s sense, as in “minstrelsy, stage plays, fiction, revelry, or rebellion” (2003, 86). When the Medium shares her body with the Indian spirit, the intimacy is grounded in the flesh, distinguishing “playing Indian,” which “worked from a white interior expressed through a “red” exterior” from a “materialization” proceeding from a “red” interior toward the white surface (2003, 86). The spirit is exuded out of an inner space in the Medium, taking control and blending with her organs and mind; thus the Indian, in a sense, interiorizes the body, and pushes itself outward to occupy the “white” surface. The Indian who was aligned with the land in the settler imagination, now as spirit occupies the interior of the settler body, turning that body inside-out, by literally speaking through the white body. The emphasis is, again, on a primary “sympathy”—affective and fleshly—between Medium and spirit, such that a blending and merging occurs, distinct from the “self-conscious artifice of minstrelsy” (Cox 2003, 203).
With “eyelids closed, and all power of action…suspended,” the white medium entered into a potentially transgressive surrender to the red other, the white tongue refusing “its office” while the red prattled on, a miscegenation nearly unthinkable between white and black but one that become the rule between white and Indian (Cox 2003, 203).

While this radical blending is only ever momentary and will ultimately be recuperated by the sovereignty of the white body as mediating vessel, it draws out, I am arguing, the affective and enfleshed intimacy performed between the Medium and the Indian spirit.

The “sympathetic” blending of bodies—or rather, the blending between diverse spirits and the body of the Medium—here makes the body the central locus or territory through which the spirits move. As Cox put it, “the emotional heart of antebellum Spiritualism was in the torso of an open body, a “self” reflected in the Spiritualist belief that all individuals interpenetrated one another and affected one another’s lives” (Cox 2003, 165). Or, as I experienced it, Spiritualist community is made up of the overlooked correspondences and intimacies between strangers—felt affinities between individuals read as “signs” of affinity (as in the repetition of images, colors, animals and people). Such signs coded every encounter between humans, and between humans and nonhumans, with spiritual significance. The body is thus experienced as “porous,”: “unbounded and mutually engaged,” in chains of sympathy forming “an emotional topography that entangled individuals” (Cox 2003,165). The blending described, between the body of the Medium and that of the spirit, thus draws upon this idea of sympathetic chains of relations, affective and indeterminate, opening bodies to other bodies.

I want to think this fleshly blending with Indian spirits in relation to the idea that the Indian spirit is the first, as autochthonous, Medium. There is a tension here between these moments of bodily blending, and the idea of the Indian as predecessor or “condition” of white mediumship, and thus to be superseded. Referring back to the little red pamphlet I obtained at
Lily Dale, written in 1940 by a Spiritualist, the amateur historian analogizes the Indian “wigwam” to the Medium’s cabinet: “for the collection and condensation of the ectoplasmic substance needed for levitation and for direct-voice and materialization, there couldn't ‘be imagined a better cabinet than was made by a wigwam with its narrow slit of an opening” (Harding 1940, 13). It is as if in this strange analogy, an unconscious desire is made manifest—the desire to make of the Indian body, like the wigwam, a vessel to contain and mediate the spirit of the settler. What I mean is, by literally putting the Indian spirit into the body of the white Medium, the inner space of the Medium—right down to her organs—the Medium, on the inside, is contained within the spectral body of the Indian, while on the outside, the white Medium contains the Indian. As I have said in Part 1, the Medium, in and through her body as container, treated as an second-body or instrument, intensifies and makes endure the presence of spiritual bodies, bringing these to the “surface.” Here, however, she does not merely contain or assimilate the Indian spirit, but is also contained by the Indian. In this sense, the analogy between the “wigwam” and the cabinet, both enclosures for living bodies, draws out, to my mind, the even stranger idea that the role of the Indian spirit is, in some sense, to be the first container of settler spirituality—the Ur ground through which all white spirit communication must pass in realizing its own authenticity.

If such a blending of spirits in this “community of sensation,” as Cox called it, must be distinguished from “playing Indian,” what to make of the rather poor performance of the “white man’s” Indian, as in the figure of Ho Ho? It hardly seems possible that Ho Ho could be mistaken for a “real” Indian by anyone—as such a poor imitation. If not reaching for authenticity, the question seems to be, what is he an imitation of? Is he an imitation of an imitation, making him all the more abstract, as an imitation of the imaginary Indian already a cliché? Perhaps Ho Ho is
not meant to bring forward the “authentic Indian” at all. Is the desire for a relation to the authentic aboriginal on the part of the Spiritualist already so far removed that it is enough merely to reference the idea of the autochthonous figure, as an already generalized abstraction, to ground Spiritualist spirit communication in relation to American soil and identity?

If nothing else, it would seem that what is performed is the right to “play Indian,” where exercising that right is a form of claiming, or rather assimilating, the Indian spirits to oneself. Understood in this way, whether the performance is realistic or completely fake would not matter. If the Spiritualist body is viewed as a portal through which Indian spirits must pass, as McGarry argues, then the Spiritualist/settler body is the only future in which Indian appears. The Medium is thus contained by the Indian spirit, only to supersede this inner Indian. While in the 19th century it seems Indians resembled more closely actual historical figures, although still as “stand ins” for an entire race, today it seems the Medium does not need to make her spirits resemble “real” Indians—for they are only playing at evoking Indians—the “real” Indian has always already been conquered and claimed. How can Indian’s remain living presences to Spiritualists, when this relation is repeatedly deadened by the reality of settlement? The real play, it seems to me, is the one that authorizes one body as the portal of another, thereby taking its power into itself—as if the Medium’s harnessing of the Indian is an inversion of what happens in La maitres fous, in those famous possession rites of the Hauka filmed by Jean Rouche, wherein spirits of British colonial administrators inhabit the body of the colonized, both mimicked by the colonized in conscious performance, a kind of playing white-face, and in the deeper acts of ritual possession. It is the difference in similarity—“they so clearly are and are not Europeans”—a difference marked foremost by the “eye bulging” contortions of the possessed body as it becomes-European. And it is the visibility of this gap in the moment of identification with the
European spirit, Taussig seems to be saying, that makes the Hauka “the signifies to Europeans awesome Otherness if not downright savagery” (1993, 240-241). In harnessing the power of the colonizer, by taking on their identity in possession, makes visible this very mimetic capacity of the colonized as power over the European. Only here, to return to the white American Spiritualist inhabited by the spirit of the Indian, the conquering has always already happened, or so it seems to the settler—for there is no present need to truly “harness” the power of the Indian, it seems merely a play-acting in Red-face, lacking the power of possession—or even less, a referential nod that re-legitimizes (and thus repeats) an Anglo-American supercessionist autochthony.

And yet, we are still left with the mystery of trance states—as a practice whose aim is not to reference spirits, but to blend spirit bodies with fleshly bodies. In trance states, we are told, such a blending reaches down into the organs themselves, making it hard to discern which body is contained and which is the container. Trance states do not only claim to concern the surfaces of bodies, but a becoming-Indian on the inside, taking in the “spirit”—as if to try on another body, by going deeper than a mask. I do not wish to discount states of radical spiritual blending in mediumship, wherein a “translation” may be said to occur in which “images” are “translated into material forms” (Deloria 1998, 6). This is the phrase Deloria uses to describe the translation from an American imagination of Indians to the performance of Indian-ness he calls “playing Indian.” (1998, 6) But, here, in the context of spirit mediumship, such a translation from images to material forms goes deeper into the body itself, and takes up, albeit in a different register, the problematic I wish to address: the way that images become spectral bodies. The spectral body is after all a kind of animate image, materialized through the fleshly body of the Medium.

There are two aspects of mediumship that here become visible, in what seems to me an irresolvable tension within mediumship. On the one hand, the body performs the limit that
delimits, and in a sense freezes, the scene of colonial transformations. What I mean is, the body in “playing Indian,” and thus materializing colonial images, becomes a place-holder for a recuperative whiteness, a concretization of subaltern difference into a ventriloquized sameness—the freezing of the Indian into a generalized cliché. On the other hand, I think it would be wrong to read mediumistic trance-formations, more generally, as simply failed transformations—passages of difference back into a recuperation of sameness. For there is also the fact that spirit communication makes visible certain potentialities of the body. If we bracket the role of Indian spirits for a moment, a form of transformation does seem to take place within the Medium—not in the ossified image of the Indian spectre, but in her body as “inner theater.” All while the Medium sits perfectly still. Let us call it an intensive transformation, as we saw in the case of William’s transfiguration where the different spirit faces pass through the head of the medium seated—a body statically tensed for the dynamic passage of spectral forms. She is becoming all of these images—entering the images, sensing, feeling, allowing herself to be affected by them—but finally, she lets them go, she returns to herself. This is what it means to have control in Mediumship, to no be carried away by the spirits you let enter in. It is an image of the possibilities and limits of the body at once. For even if the body is static, emplaced, identified, and pathologized, there is something porous and undefined, something changeable, something trying to escape itself—and for these reasons, given to ‘intensive’ and spiritual transformations.

**Forgive and Forget**

A summer resident of the Dale, Frank, not himself a Medium, at least not professionally, owns a house in Lily Dale where I attended three table tipping séances, during which a conversation about guides took place. Frank explained guides in yet another way. As my friend Bob often
reminded me, Frank is one of the wealthier residents of the Dale. A man who is “successful,” in
the world outside, but comes to the Dale every summer where he shares a house with his wife
Delia and their teenage son. He said there are five different types of guides: including a
“protector” spirit and a “gatekeeper,” a “prank” spirit and a “wisdom” spirit and one more, “for
happiness.” This was not a classification I had come across until now. I take it to belong to the
“tradition” in some sense, but not to be of primary concern to most practitioners. Frank went on
to say the “protective” spirit “is almost always Native American” to which he added, “I don’t get
the whole thing cause… why would they help us since how we treated them? Why would they?
But you know it's a different… eh… forgive and forget… so that is usually their job.” Forgive
and forget, but who forgets? Is it the Indian who forgets, arriving with blessings and protection,
or the settler who converts the history of violence to a narrative of being always already
“forgiven”? Yet there is a moment of hesitation in this forgiving and forgetting: Frank, like M.’
frustration with the all “the talk” about Indian guides wonders, “Why would they help us?”

It is almost as if, given Frank’s emphasis on the Indian as “protector,” mediating what
spirits will be let through and into communication with the Medium, that the Indian becomes the
condition of possibility for the séance itself—and thus for any communication with spirits. “I
always say if you ask for them and if they are not here then it’s not a good séance! And they are
most always here… if you are doing a séance and they're not here, be somewhat leery! I don't
mean leery like fearful… I mean, nothing bad is going to happen to you, you know, but just don't
believe what you are told…”

While Frank considered the Indian spirits “protectors” he reserved the role of “gatekeeper”
for the Fox sisters: The Fox sisters are the gatekeepers, because they were the first mediums. I’d
never heard this before either—the Fox sisters as gatekeepers—but the idea certainly emphasizes
their foundational role as the “first” to form a “code,” as an “intelligent” and intelligible form of communication with the spirit world, and thus as gatekeepers of the “tradition” of North American spirit communication more generally. It is an example, also, of the role of history in Spiritualism, which, as I’ve said, seems always to be folded back into experience, the Fox Sisters appearing not through the “dead” images of the archive but as “living” spirits aiding the present-day Medium in her communication with the dead.

At this moment during the séance, I asked Frank if we could figure out who my guide is, and Frank’s wife Delia suddenly “asked the table”:

*What’s the Indian tribe?*

The table tips a little.

*It’s the Iroquois right?* Asks Frank, turning to me and saying *“cause they have five different tribes so…”*

The table is still.

*This is a stretch, Frank goes on, but is it Mohawk?*

The table tips in the affirmative.

With this affirmation, Frank turns to me and says, “If you are here long enough [at Lily Dale] you can use the *Ouija* board to figure out his name…but for now, you know it's a Mohawk Indian.” I asked him how he gets confirmation that his protector guide is there: “If you don’t know the name yet, just ask…ask if my Mohawk, for example, for you, guide is here… if it's a ‘No’ [judging by whether the table tips in the affirmative or not] just don’t go on with the séance.” With this warning he proceeded with the séance.

*Forgive and forget!* Frank said of the Indian spirits, followed by *that is usually their job.* The Indian heals, and healing involves forgiveness, and forgiveness, as the commonplace saying
goes, involves forgetting. Here, the Indian spirits, who filter through all the spirits that enter into communion with the Medium appear as the necessary condition of, if not a safe séance, one in which the communication of the spirits can be trusted: if they aren’t there just don’t believe what you are told. Besides ensuring truths will be spoken, that the spirits won’t lie to the living, the Indian also, forgives the past. For in forgiving the past, that is forgiving the settler, the past is laid to rest—that is the idea, anyway. “At the most basic level” said Cox of the Indian as figure of forgiveness and reconciliation in Spiritualism, such a “displacement of justice in the afterlife passed for a sort of antinomian ticket out of collective guilt. Indian leaders like Black Hawk, Powhatan, Thunder, Logan and Little Crow were erased as figures of resistance, only to reappear as the ultimates of forgiveness, dedicated only to ‘shedding their healing magnetism and peace-influences upon the inhabitants of earth, sharing the healing secrets of generations of Indians with those who had inflicted the greatest harm’” (Cox 2003, 207). The Indian is made into a figure of forgiveness because the Indian is forgotten. Or, maybe it is better to say, the Indian is made present as a spectre of forgiveness and forgetting. Forgetting, partakes in settlements erasures—an emptying out of content that allows a universalizing narrative, as the work of spirit, to do the work of laying to rest particular histories of violence.

As Cox notes of the Indian Spirits at the séance tables following the Civil War: “with the clarity of spiritual vision earned in nature and enhanced by death, Indians renounced their personal histories of suffering at the hands of whites and shed their resentments for the mantle of repentance, altruism, and reconciliation [italics mine]” (2003, 198). Thus when Cox says, the “essence of the Indian” transcended death, he is talking not about specific persons, but of Indians already converted to general personages who stand-in for their race. “The memories accrued and the affective bonds forged in life remained with them, but unlike whites, Indian spirits bore the
attributes of an entire race. Every spirit Indian was, in a sense, every-Indian, stripped to the essentials” (2003, 190). Just as “white spirits retained talents and prejudices beyond the grave, Indian memories and emotions were translated into the afterlife in undiluted form. Red Jacket remained the orator, Samoset the leader, and Pocahontas the altruist and intermediary.” What survives are “types,” forms emptied of their particular content—their “personal histories.” And yet, these forms are then re-imagined as the affective source of an imagined reconciliation on the part of the settler—a reconciliation that takes place beyond life—in the space of the spirit world, and is spoken through the body of the non-native settler. Talk about displacements! Not only of the body of the Indian, but of the place of reconciliation, pushed as it is, along with the Indian’s claim to sovereignty, to the “happy hunting grounds” of the spirit world.

And if personal memories and histories do not survive death—then what does? According to Spiritualism it is not history that survives death, but the above all our relations with others—our affective relations (Cox 2003, 85). Not memory, or history but the affective bonds we gave rise to and forged, in our dealings with others—both positive and negative. Yet persistently, within in the visitations of spirit Indians it is precisely this proximity of an affective bond that is affirmed, in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation—while all else, the history of violence, past and present, is forgotten.

So how, in all this, does the figure of the reconciling and forgiving Indian relate to the Medium’s own forgetfulness, and the forgetting inscribed in Spiritualism’s relation to its own history? The medium does not remember. She does not recall a presence already converted to pastness, but makes the past return as an affecting presence. This occurs in the giving of messages, as well as in the already mentioned trance states, where one “forgets” what occurred when the spirit took over, the implication being that the medium was absent while the spirit was
Then there is also the forgetting of one’s personal biography—what I have called the suspension of biography—in the relationships between mediums, and of course in the relationship between medium and client, where the medium must know as little as possible about the client. And, finally, the forgetting of history—or rather, history because it is always being re-presented, is never really history—the past is never really past. And this forgetting of history is again articulated, as I said in Part 1, through the little attention paid to the preservation of archival materials of Spiritualism at Lily Dale, captured in the figure of M., as one of the lone conservers of historical documents.

2.6. A Spiritual Geography

If the living Indian is figured as a “survival,” to use the anthropologist E.B. Tylor’s 19th century idea of the persistence of anachronistic “animist” practices and beliefs in the modern world, that is, alive but rendered dead because relegated to an always “vanishing” past, the spectral Indian is dead but rendered living, as a figure animating revenance. If the past of settlement is a past of violent clearings—cuts made in bodies, time and territory—in inscribing a “new beginning” onto an imagined terra nullius as national beginning that disavows its past, then how could the Medium, after this fact, communicate with spirits? Spirits are the past, because they are the dead. By making return, not only kith and kin of the white settler, but the very bodies of natives “cleared” by settlement, Spiritualism reaches into that “cleared” past, and charges Indian spirits with gatekeeping, making the abstracted Indian the condition through which any and all spirit pasts must return. If you want to talk to your grandmother, it is the Indian spirit, as gatekeeper, who makes this happen—or so it was when Indian spirits were more ubiquitous than they are today. What is re-presented is not so much the Indian, but the laying out of an autochthonous
condition through which spirits can return. The Indian spirit in America becomes, I am saying, not only a figure of return, haunting the history of settlement, but a figure through which white spirits too, and through which white bodies might mediate this return, the condition through which they can come back and inhabit the present. The Indian, I am saying, appears here as the condition for the settler’s immanent communication with spirits. Paradoxically, through the displaced Indian, the settler body is made to return in a spiritual re-territorialization of the American present. As if, in turning to the Indian, American Spiritualists further sever themselves from Old Europe, whose spirits, it would seem, are too distant, their pagan past too past—a polytheism of immanent spirits and natural forces, what are sometimes called “folk” beliefs, long since Christianized then secularized, cannot alone provide the influence needed for a New World modern “spirit” religion, itself a web of different traditions, of occult, metaphysical and Christian elements. As Carrol put it, “Spiritualists incorporated both Christian and “alternative” elements into the experiential dimension of their religion (Carrol 1997, 10). This produces a tension with Christianity, it seems, one that is played out in the Spiritualists’ claimed affinities with Indians. Spiritualists have been called “come outers” who leave behind the institutional and dogmatic aspects of Christianity. In following the polyvocal lead of the spirits, however, they also leave behind the idea of an unmediated transcendent God of Protestantism for a diffuse deity based in the “Infinite Intelligence” of “Nature”—a world inhabited by immanent spirits of the dead who communicate and inhabit the plane of the living. The problem with turning from Christianity to an immanent communication with spirits, is that it must arise from what, DH Lawrence called, the “spirit of place.” You have to contend with spirits of the land, and the histories of the land where you dwell. In thinking about a distinctly North American spirit of place, DH Lawrence turned to “the old American books,” 19th century classics of American literature, in which he
found what he called a “new feeling”—the feeling of a “shifting over from the old psyche to something new, a displacement. And displacements hurt.” (Lawrence 1971, 8).

Philip Deloria reads Lawrence’s “aboriginal” spirit of place as a mark of American “incompleteness,” which at base is an incompleteness that has its condition in “the Indian.” Thus Deloria says, if Indians represented “instinct and freedom,” and “the spirit of the continent,” “whites desperately desired that spirit, yet they invariably failed to become aboriginal and thus ‘finished’” (Deloria 1998, 3). Trapped within that “incompleteness” marked by an inner “ambivalence,” an ambivalence that failed to realize itself in a “positive identity,” the settler is torn always between the desire for “civilization and savagery,” order and freedom (1998, 3, 4). The contradictions “embedded in noble savagery,” namely the contradictory “urge to idealize and desire Indians and a need to despite and dispossess them,” argues Deloria,” are themselves the “precondition for the formation of American identities (1998, 4). Spiritualists thereby confront an ever present contradiction, or “indeterminateness” within the American soul: between freedom and order, the longing for a naturalness, an “aboriginal closeness,” with the spirit of the land itself, and the desire to control and conquer that same land and its inhabitants (Deloria 1998, 5).

If here white Spiritualists look to “the Indian” to authenticate the ground of their spirit communion it is as always displaced settler subjects, themselves possessed by a longing for an authentic “place” beyond the failed harmony between natural and culture—a harmony always out of reach by the very dialectics of conquering or mastery. Spiritualists, as modern American subjects, nevertheless reach for “nature,” as a resistance to the overdeterminations of a modern technologized world. By locating a place for the now delocalized spirits within the (settler’s) body, spirits of the land now follow the body of the equally delocalized settler; settlement
becomes a matter of internalizing not only the land itself, but the displaced bodies of settlements' Others. The new frontier is in a cosmic elsewhere—now here—the here of the displaced body of the settler as a new territory, or territorialization of the American spirit. As if, I want to say, the displacement of the individual, and thus the individual body, is at one end of a tensed rope, being pulled in the other direction by the many “voices” and temporalities of the spirits. In this way, Spiritualists’ articulate a very American problem—one that joins the problem of space, imagined as an immensity of empty land, to the desire for a “natural” aboriginal relation to that land forever out-of-reach by virtue of settlements displacements.

**Nature Religion**

Through a suspension of history, the Spiritualist reaches back into the prehistory of American history to find the Indian in spiritual harmony with a prelapsarian Nature. It is in reaching back to this harmony, before the fall of settlement, that the Spiritualist finds his spiritual ground, and the aid needed for the present—the fallen present of modern technologized alienation: “Is it any wonder that incarnate spirits who had lived such lives of intimacy with Nature’s truths, when passing out of the flesh, should make such able helpers in spirit communication through mediumship?” The Spiritualist contrasts the purity and lack of artifice of the Indian with the “civilization” and “complex conventions” and “unnatural ways of thinking and living” of the whites, which “puts Nature so far wary from our souls that we who live it, suffer a great spiritual loss”(). In thus making the Indian return, as a figure of a time before time, the potentiality for a new harmony, based spiritually on Nature, is sought.

For Spiritualism emergent in the 19th century, there is the desire to return and reclaim what in a time of rising technological-industrial-modern-materialism, felt increasingly alienated.
What the Spiritualist movement reclaims is a spiritual emplacement of the body and senses in “nature,” the merging of nature and spirit in “natural law” as the guiding principle, and the a harmonization of nature and God which reveals an immutable *Infinite Intelligence* in the world which communicates with us, if we listen. The idea of a Nature-God is articulated doubly by Spiritualists: in its modern rational valence as *Infinite Intelligence*, and in its aboriginal guise as *Great Spirit*, echoing the settlers’ imagination of Native American religion. All of Nature speaks, and speaks to us through the diffuse sympathy of spirits: Natural Law constitutes an ethical set of principles, that when adhered to lead one into harmony with nature and God at once. While on the one hand, firmly rooted in a modern language of machines and networked communication technologies, on the other, Spiritualism draws heavily upon the idea of God as grounded in Nature and natural law: the spirits are part of the laws of nature, of cause-and effect logics, where the meta-world of spirit is correspondentially connected to material life.

Here, the spirits appear as part of a minor consortium of “nature religion” in America, that nevertheless runs through the national story and begins with the influence of Native American religion as encountered by the settler, and includes the Shakers, Mesmerists, the Tanscendentalists, and the Theosophists (Albanese 2012). Catherine Albanese’ definitive work, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, traces an American pluralism from “colonial days and before,” and points to the centrality of 19th century Spiritualism as consolidating various strands which she names “metaphysical religion” and in a slightly different vein, “nature religion” (Albanese 2007). What she terms “metaphysical religion,” begins with “Native American [religious] pluralism” and takes up the idea of loosely grouped “occult” traditions as persistently intwined in North American religious belief and practice with minor forms of Christianity. Coagulating out of a “mix” that harkens back to colonial times, and includes the influence of the “cures from
blacks and Indians,” “lingering English country magic” and its European equivalents, and the “bookish high-culture hermeticism,” Albanese locates 19th century Spiritualism as a “mass movement that swept middle nineteenth-century America and later refused to go away, even as it grew smaller and more institutionalized” (Albanese 2012). Carrol likewise considers this grouping, “expressed in Transcendentalism and Spiritualism before the Civil War and, later in the nineteenth century, in Christian Science, Theosophy, and New Thought,” as emphasizing “an impersonal divine principle over a personal God, focused on the individual’s inner life” which “denied or played down the existence of evil,” in favor of “self-realization through union with or perfect apprehension of the divine” and continuous “spiritual progression, even after death, eventuating in salvation” (Carrol 1997, 10).

2.7. Spectres at the Foundation: Puritans and Indians

Tracing the spectral body in the story of North American settlement returns us to the problem of foundation as always already mythologized, already spectralized—beset by internal and external spirits and ghosts. The prehistory of this spectralization lies in the drama of the earliest New England settlers, the Puritans, for whom settlement was “an essentially spiritual drama […] acted out both in the flesh and in the mind” (Bergland 2000, 27). As such it was a drama connecting the relation between inner spiritual states and the outer wilderness. In a popular sermon, typical of the evocative jeremiad, the most “important literary form in Puritan New England, Samuel Danforth’s A Brief recognition of New England’s Errand into the Wilderness, of 1671 warned that “unless the internal wildernesess were tamed, the external wilderness would conquer the settlers” (Bergland 2000, 26). At the same time, the distinction between internal and external was never so rigid, insofar as New Englanders of the 17th century were a people who “lived in an
enchanted universe. Theirs was a world of wonders.’ They saw visions in the sky, and they heard voices speak from heaven. They were struck with pokers, with boots, and with rocks. Pins and needless struck themselves into their bodies. Some of them signed pacts with the Devil” (Bergland 2000, 26-27). The prehistory of settlement is a spiritual geography through and through, and as distinctly Puritan, involves the continual movement between inside and outside: inner faith and external experience. Puritans lived in a world of “wonders” demonic and divine, a world framed within the Protestant division between inner faith and outer law as the incessant battle of the faithful with the outer disturbances of a ‘fallen world,’ rendered visceral in two aligned figures, the “Indian” and the American Wilderness. Renee Bergland thus notes that for the Puritans the hauntings of the New World were rarely by their own “ancestral spirits” and more often “unsettling figures of shadowy bests, Indians, or old women” (Bergland 2000, 27).

Puritan’s saw their crossing of the Atlantic and encounter with the “New World,” as part of the “Exodus” story (Albanese 1990, 38). Thus crossing the Atlantic as a confrontation with the wonders and terrors of the sea, was seen in line with the crossing of the desert: “the providences of God in a wilderness testing.” The tribulations of their journey across, was also one that inspired awe in the Puritan, according to Catherine Albanese, as encounter with an enchanted nature, presenting itself through the “exotic realities of the Atlantic during their middle passage,” which meant “some Puritan’s saw without biblical spectacles,” referring to the lens of a scriptural geography mapped onto a New World (Albanese 1990, 38). That “nature mediated the experience of the New World,” as a place of spiritual testing and garden of Eden like bounty, conformed with the idea that for many Puritans’ New England was “the promised

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21 Albanese notes the literature encouraging immigration recounted the “bounty of the new land,” among which were included paradisical descriptions of a “warm kind of earth,” from which springs carry the sweetest water – “no better water in the world.”
land of Canaan,” offering “sanctuary and a place of spiritual nurture.” Such spiritual nurture is thus located, placed within the natural landscape—one of beauty, bounty and solitude—such that this wilderness “where God had planted them took on sacred qualities” (Albanese 1990, 39). The wilderness becomes “an inward blooming garden” for the Puritan, because it is protected, and “surrounded by the hedge of God’s grace” (Albanese 1990, 39).

The New World is seen as a sacred land set aside to enlarge the kingdom of God on earth—but through labor, always through labor! Albanese draws attention to a fundamental ambiguity inherent in the Puritan perception of New England, as a “place of promise and of threat”: “A negative sacred ground in the providence of Satan, it could—in the language of their myth—metamorphose into the place of God’s testing and benediction” (Albanese 1990, 40). Likewise the ambiguity of the Indian as demonic Shape could be inverted into Shape of spiritual redemption, to be included in the “hedge” of God’s grace. As the Puritan Joseph Carlyle put it: “our brethren who with extreme difficulties and experiences have Planted themselves in the Indian Wildernesses, have also labored night and day with prayers and tears and Exhortations to Plant the Indians as a spirituall Garden, into which Christ might c...come and eat his pleasant fruits” (Albanese 1990, 39).

The constant alignment of Indians with the outside, as wilderness, was both figural and demographic, as America, contra terra nullius, was and is, as everybody knows, an already inhabited land. Francis Jennings notes, in his seminal book, The Invasion of America, “European explorers and invaders discovered an inhabited land.” It was not a pristine, or empty wilderness but an Indian Wilderness—had it been so, Jennings argues, the Europeans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would have been “incapable of conquering true wilderness,” possessing neither the “technology nor the social organization […] to maintain of its own resources, outpost
colonies thousands of miles from home’’ (Jennings 1976, 15). Their competence did lie, however, in “conquering other people and that is what they did. They did not settle virgin land, they invaded and displaced a resident population.” It is then upon this displacement of Indian bodies that the Wilderness is cleared, made *terra nullius*, for settlement (Jennings 1976, 15).

While the Puritan’s may have “absorbed something of the Amerindian spirits that haunted the land,” their vision of dominion as *conversion* and *clearing*, meant that there was an ambivalence always accompanying their proximity to “nature” (Albanese 1990). Whatever enchantments nature offered, which were either heightened or diminished by their “biblical spectacles,” in the end, Puritan’s decided that “the best wild country was subdued wild country,” and proceeded to turn, or rather to perform a profane conversion of Algonquin lands “from a sacred to an ordinary condition” (Albanese 1990, 40). As such, Albanese understands the Puritan sense of divine providence as one entailing “the extension of man’s dominion on earth” hastening “the enlargement of Christ’s kingdom pointing toward the Apocalypse” (1990, 40). Following Puritan logic, the further “man” spreads himself across the far reaches of the earth, in the name of extending God’s kingdom on earth, the closer toward an apocalyptic rejoinder of heaven and earth we find ourselves.

Paradoxically, if the Puritan made the sacred land “ordinary” and thus profane through their commercial and proprietary endeavors—slowly walking toward apocalypse, as they saw it—they were determining a future in which the “nature” they had been awed by would always remain, “just over the horizon.” Nature, in its ambivalence as both garden of Eden and fallen domain of Satan, occupied by the demonic *Shapes* of Indians, prefigured the Transcendentalist dilemma, albeit in a more Platonic vein, “of Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and assorted other Americans,” between nature as “sensuous presence” and “material absence”: “by themselves
material bodies—and so the natural world—did not exist as substances. Rather, they were made real, imbued with meaning, through human perception and divine power and knowledge” (Albanese 1990, 45). Nature “would become” in America, as we see later with the Transcendentalists’ who sought a “correspondence between spirit and nature,” “the central religious symbol of the many inhabitants of the land.”

Cotton Mather, one of the prominent writers of the Salem witch trials, pictured what he found demonic without, to be also within himself: the disturbing specters of “swarthy Indians, sooty devils and unruly women” (Bergland 2000). Thus the war waged within the inner confines of the Puritan “self,” one between righteousness and fallenness, cannot be divided from the external specters that haunted the Puritan man’s order — “sooty Indians and unruly women.”

These were the *shapes* that Satan most often took in the physical New England world, and they were therefore also the shapes that Satan took within New England souls, at least as they explained themselves (Bergland 2000, quoting Cotton Mather).

Cotton Mather’s “evocations of swarthy Indians are not metaphoric,” according to Bergland, who here, drawing on the seminal work of Ann Kibbey discussed here in Part 1, calls them rather “figural,” defined by Kibbey as: “*shapes* that literalize the demonic essence.” Indians, in particular, moved between the demonic and nature — as both “figures for Satan and also figures for the natural world.” As such, the idea of *figura* from the Latin, as Kibbey uses it, encompasses the earthly figuration of spiritual realities.

Their “eradication” was thus staged upon two fronts: the figural and the actual, the “Indian” as demonic *Shape* and the Indian as land to be conquered and cleared. The spectral “Indian” was thus far more difficult to “remove” — because as Bergland insists, “Indians could never be eradicated from the New England Puritan’s mind until that person died. Internal Indians could never be defeated since the battle against Satan could only be won without dying” (2000,
29). The figural image of the Indian as spectre that haunts the Puritan mind and body, is here both separated and conflated with the actual body of the Indian, as realized in the finality of the dead Indian: “only Indian corpses had a concrete reality; before they were dead, the Native Americans were representatives of the great unknown” (Bergland, 50). But Bergland’s larger point seems to be that even the concretion of a “corpse” did not guarantee the eradication of the image of the “Indian,” as spectre that haunts—quite the opposite. The more dead Native American’s and the more their actual bodies receded from the centers of settlement, the more they returned (and were even sought after) as specters of the American imagination. Or in Molly McGarry’s pithy summation, referring to 19th century Spiritualist ideas about Indian spirits: “to be spiritual, Indians had to be spirits” (McGarry 2008, 83).

Still, this separation and conflation of the spectre and the corpse, highlights the anxiety that the spectral body brings — what is feared most is the plasticity of the body itself, and the doubt this displacement of the spectre (image) from the body raises about “the body.” To pin down the image is to tie it to the concretion of death — to suture the separation of the figure or Shape from the actual body, once and for all, thereby to rid oneself of the haunting. And yet this suturing, turning to the history of violence that is American settlement, does not rid the settler of the haunting Indian. Instead, the spectral “Indian” body persists throughout American literature and discourse and enters the body of the settler, most distinctly, through the figure of the Medium of 19th century Spiritualism.

The spectrality of the body which lies at the foundation of settlements imaginaries, begins, I’m arguing, with a certain Puritan iconoclasm that gives rise to the interchangeability between actual and figural bodies and makes the figural body (Shape) an iconic embodiment of spiritual forces. This inheritance undergirds the making of the nation as haunted settler society,
as Bergland claims, as well as the formation of a uniquely American subjectivity in which spectral bodies and thus spectral space, become internal figures.

The “English Colonial Project,” writes Bergland, was a “holy endeavor” and Christian settlers “were soldiers in the war against Satan, who was in turn, “determined to unsettle what God has settled,” echoing back to the words of Cotton Mather:

I believe that never were more Satanical Devices used for the Unsettling of any people under the sun, than what have been employed for the extirpation of this Vine, which God has here planted, Casting out the Heathen (Bergland 2000, 25).

The “Indian” as spectral figure haunting settlement, is a figure of unsettlement. Unsettlement thus refers both to “the undoing of the colonial project of settlement” and to the uncanny “feeling of dread and creeping horror” that arises when Satan’s devices — Indians, diseases, lightning bolts, witches — threaten settlement” (Bergland 2000, 25).

**Spiritual Space and Literal Land**

In the story of North American settlement there is, from the beginning, insofar as that beginning mandated the enclosure of space into private property, no “space” for the actual Indian. For the Indian is metonymically treated as land—“communal” land—thus the enclosure of the latter, in a conversion of land to property, meant the enclosure and destruction of the former. As Patrick Wolfe points out in his work on settler colonialism, “settlement was always was about land”: “in the Indigenous case, it is difficult to speak of an articulation between colonizer and native since the determinate articulation is not to a society but directly to the land, a precondition of social organization” (Wolfe 1999). One of the distinguishing features of settler societies, as opposed to other colonial contexts, is the emphasis not on extracting surplus value from indigenous labor, but of “displacing indigenes from (or replacing them on) the land” (Wolfe 1999). The
determinate articulation between colonizer and native is not to a people, but to the land itself—in this sense, the relation between colonizer and Indian is one between colonizer and an encounter with North American space. To repeat the poet Charles Olson’s refrain: *America is Space.* Settlement’s claim to sovereignty over the native nations is one that involved, in the first moment, an equivalence of the Indian to land and the frontiers of the New World as generalized space to be assimilated. And since the space encountered was decidedly not empty, but occupied by native peoples, it would have to be converted to empty, homogenous and thus quantifiable space.

This required, in the second moment, that land be converted from Indian/land to property, which meant a parceling-out of the actual bodies “Indians” from the land through “removals” (aka forcible dispossession and murder) and enclosures, as well as land allotments. Meanwhile, this process of colonial conversion is described as “natural,” and the “vanishing” of the Indian, “destiny.” This destiny means the Indian must finally be subtracted out of the land relation altogether, for as land becomes property the Indian can no longer be aligned with it: as a famous Spiritualist once put, it is the “Indian’s unwillingness to be civilized into the rules and rituals of property-respecting laborers [that] marked them as beyond the pale” (McGarry 2008, 85). The limit through which the Indian cannot pass, the limit of Indian assimilation into nation-making, is named property, and destines the Indian, in the colonial equivocation with communal land and empty space, for a spirit world “beyond the pale.” As sublimated spirit, the Indian can be retained for the settler as a spiritualized manifestation of autochthony. This is strange, stranger even than it seems. For what is retained is also this relation between the Indian and land, only now land has becomes spiritual space, a space that can be re-presenced in and through the settler body. Such an internalization of the spirit Indian into the body of the settler, I am saying, allows
the settler to also move the wilderness inward: where the Indian, standing in for the space of wilderness and freedom so distinctly American, also composes a distinctly American inner spiritual topography.

While Spiritualists of the 19th century were eager to claim this spiritual space within themselves, by literally mediating Indian spirits through the bodies of mostly white women, this desire to retain has its condition in, I am saying, a colonial logic by which “spiritual space and literal lands” are conflated, beginning with the Puritans. The discourse of the “doomed” to vanish Indian is prefigured in the Puritan alignment of Indian death with “Calvinist providence” (McGarry 2008). John Winthrop’s “chilling statement” encapsulates this alignment: “For the natives, they’re neere all dead of small Poxe, so as the Lord hath cleared our title to what we possess,” indicating, argues McGarry, the “foundational centrality of Indians, and indeed Indian death, to an American vision of a City on a Hill” (McGarry 2008). Beginning with the Puritans, Indian death is made necessary through a conflation of “spiritual space and literal lands cleared,” constructing “the Indian as fodder for God’s intention” (McGarry 2008).

The inevitable “vanishing” of the Indian, prefigured in Puritan attitudes, and culminating in Andrew Jackson’s Removals Acts in the 19th century, does not merely pertain to Indian bodies, but, as I’ve tried to show, to the conquering and clearing of spiritual space. In this regard, I consider Spiritualism in its attention to the re-presencing of Indian bodies in spirit form, within an inheritance of what I call the spiritual geography of North American settlement, a geography which has its condition in the conflation of literal lands and spiritual space, as much as literal bodies and spiritual bodies.

The Puritan assignation of the Indian to a spiritual place in the foundation of America’s providential design—Indians as a Spiritual Garden—is echoed in the Spiritualist ideas,
following the Civil War, around what historian Robert Cox has called an “apartheid of spheres” (2003). In these separate and distinct spheres of the spirit world, different races would be sequestered, and the Indian in particular, would enjoy a pre-colonial land, a “happy hunting ground” and a return of the buffalo (Cox 2003).

The history of “spectralization of the Indian” into phantasmic image, I want to say, bears something within it: a chain of conversions of material land, bodies and blood to abstractions thereof. In this way, the (spectral) figure of the Indian encompasses a history of abstraction, whereby the real loss of “spiritual space and literal lands,” is reproduced as code or image. Here, abstraction begins in the act of commensuration (as opposed to perhaps a diagrammatic abstraction), where two terms must first be generalized: the general Indians and land in general. In thus generalizing the particular, the Indian and Land can enter into a metonymic relation. At the same time, the Indian/land must be made quantifiable if (they) are to be converted to property—another abstraction. By this magical logic, a seemingly un-quantifiable category, Indianness, is converted to a measurable “blood quantum” (a strangely material and immaterial quantity) and then converted to a measure of property, which itself required the conversion of land into abstract homogenous space, divisible into equal parts. Blood and spirit are at once reduced to divisible parts. Blood becomes property, and spirit—if it is to be saved, must be sublimated out of this life and into the next. In other words, the alchemy required to make “blood” and “land,” into categories such as race and property, requires that these must be transformed from material properties and qualities into abstract quantifiable referents, first of all, by alienating intensive, qualitative forms of life. And all this is conditioned by a double abstraction of the Indian body whereby: (1) the body is made equivalent with territory, so that the body, like the land, can be allotted, made into property (2) the body of the Indian is literally
determinized from all lands, only to return transformed into spirit, *aufgehoben* into a ghosted generic “Indian” body, of an equally generic “happy hunting ground” in the spirit world. While this sublimation is marked by the return of the spirits in Spiritualism, their immanence to the earthly plane, the “apartheid of the spheres” suggests a more definitive separation of spirit life from earthly life.

In continuity with this logic, the Spiritualists’ Indians can return, however with the unexpected attribute of being “everywhere and at all times present,” because the Indian is now abstracted from any particular relation to the land, and as a general figure, can defy any allotment in space and time. What does this mean for the settler? What to make of this paradox whereby we have on the one hand, the enclosure of actual flesh and blood native peoples, living bodies limited by the laws of space and time, and on the other, the sublimation and abstraction of the Indian into spirit, attributing to the Indian an unlimited sphere of operation, subject to no place and no time in particular.

This “apartheid of the spheres,” following the Civil War, meant whites have their own heaven and Indians have theirs—and in the case of the Indian, this after-life is imagined as a pre-contact America where the buffalo roam and the landscape is untainted by white man’s technology. If here, Indian lands are sublimated into spiritual hunting grounds—preserved from the marks white colonialism—this compromise formation, on the part of the settler, makes the dead return, but now as a generalized spirit Indian returning to the settler’s land, whilst keeping the question of Native land reclamation safely sequestered to a spiritual elsewhere. This vision is interestingly, in direct opposition to the redemptive vision of the Ghost Dance led by the messianic Paiute, Wovoka in 1890; an ecstatic dance that would bring back the dead and return the land to its pre-contact state—*this land in this life*—in a vision of uniting all Native American
peoples. James Mooney in his seminal ethnography, *The Ghost Dance Religion and Wounded Knee*, says that the “great underlying principle of the Ghost dance doctrine is that the time will come when the whole Indian race, living and dead, will be reunited upon a regenerated earth, to live a life of aboriginal happiness, forever free from death, disease and misery,” while making clear that such an event is not brought by war but “by an overruling spiritual power that needs no assistance from human creatures” (Mooney 1973, 777). Mooney further “cautions his white readers to consider how some of their own religious practices might look to strangers. In a country which produces magnetic healers, shakers, trance mediums, and the like, all these things my very easily be paralleled without going far from home ” (Davis 2003, 28). Indeed it was the element of the hypnotic trance during dancing, that was the uniting characteristic of the diverse tribal articulations of Wovoka’s apocalyptic vision: “in almost every version […] the actual spiritual passageway to the new earth was the deep sleep induced by the Ghost Dance and lasting for four days. Upon awakening, the First people would realize that whites had simple been a bad dream”(Davis 2003, 29). From Mooney’s description of the Sioux Ghost Dance, for example, though far more ecstatic and outwardly expressive than any imaginable Spiritualist gathering, we might draw some vague points of correspondence with the Spiritualist séance: of course, the induction of trance-like hypnotic states, the fact that the entire dance takes place in a circle, and that the participants of this circle are “invoking the power of the Great Spirit to allow them to see and talk with their people who had died” (Mooney 1973, 917). Much more could be said about the relation between the millennial visions of the Ghost Dance Religion and radical Protestant and spiritual movements in North America, but it is sufficient to note, what seems to me a remarkable inversion here of the same dream—while the white Spiritualist after the Civil War, and thus roughly approaching the time of the Ghost Dance movement(s) of 1890, dreams of
reconciling Indians, now returned to their lands and “happy hunting grounds,” but only in the spirit world, that is sublimated to an elsewhere, the Ghost Dancers envisioned a return of the dead (thus enjoining the living) and of the buffalo, but to this land. In the latter’s dream it is the “white race, being alien and secondary and hardly real,” which “has no part in this scheme of aboriginal regeneration, and will be left behind with the other things of earth that have served their temporary purpose, or else will cease entirely to exist” (Mooney 1973, 777).

Within 19th century Spiritualism, the Indian body becomes spirit, living “beyond the pale” of life itself, a sublimation which seems to exemplify the logic of alienation and deterritorialization that defines settler modernity in general. The settler’s body is always alien to the land upon which it “labors,” and, as such, is a displaced body from an always-elsewhere. The settler’s body thus occupies a space after displacement, both his own and that of the native he displaces—he is always already cut-off from any autochthonous relation to the land he occupies. Yet it is this dream, of an authentic relation, a return to the lost garden, that I think propels the idea of the Indian as spiritual foundation of settlement—as the spirit through which settlement must pass to authenticate itself in a yearned for primordial relation to the land. Yet, by displacing the “Indian,” particularly onto an Edenic and primitive before, and along with it, a heavenly hereafter, the settler only repeats the binary between inside/outside that seems endemic to settlements’ geo-logic. The settler sets up this dualism between civilization and primitivism, between a primordial Before, the Edenic Garden, and a fallen After, in a repetitive barring of himself from that which nevertheless haunts, in the name of Nature: the affective excess and immediacy of America as an event of encounter (Space, Wilderness, the Indian) that is immanently in the body, yet cannot find adequate expression. (Cf. Albanese)
So, how do the dead move?

How indeed, is it possible for the dead to move? Where are the dead able to go? Frank Wilderson asks, referring to the image from the Chris Eyre film, *Smoke Signals*—the image of two Native women who live on the “rez” and “drive their car only in reverse, never forward” (2010, 153). The Native women in this image are, Wilderson seems to be saying, always already dead according to the image of freedom offered by the automobile. The automobile, “as one of the Settler’s most emblematic icons of mobility and progress,” carves a path of individual liberation through civil society, a movement-image of settlements a *a priori* condition—the ever forward movement to an ever receding frontier. The automobile, now a “rez mobile,” “cannot secure, for the “Savage”, agency, within civil societies touchstones of cohesion” (Wilderson III 2010, 154). The reservation is the antithesis of settlement’s forward movement, as after-image of settlement’s capture of territories—it encloses the “Savage” within a limited space of mobility, like a dead-zone. Wilderson names the space of the reservation, on the border of “civil society,” a “cartography of terra nullius,” calling out the antagonism between “the “somewhere” of civil society—that place where cars drive forward—and the “nowhere” of the reservation—the place where cars drive backward. In this “nowhere” of the reservation, however, the American automobile, driven by two Native women in reverse, “is disabled,”” its forward movement arrested (Wilderson III 2010, 154). What is brought into view, I am saying, is a movement which folds back on itself, a parody of the forward movement as proprietary em-placing that aims to “settle.”
The reservation as the negative after-image of civil societies promises is here figured as both a virtual and actual geography of the fantasy of *terra nullius*. As the fantasy of empty land, a no-where now-here, the rez parodies the movement of settlement, always moving backward away from the fantasy of frontier, or the telos of progress. Again there is a metonymic relation actualized between “the Indian” and land, for here the Indian occupies the space—the “rez”—that must be crossed by movement, in order to realize the linear fantasy of forward movement-as-freedom. Within the spatially bounded clearing that constitutes the reservation, a geographic image of the history of enclosure, the Indian body itself cannot move forward, revealing movement itself to be a problem. So, we must return to Wilderson’s question, “how indeed is it possible for the dead to move?” Against the conquering of space, the movement of the dead—those dead to “civil society” in Wilderson’s sense—must involve a very different understanding of the relation between a body, space and time. And if we follow the way that the dead seem to present themselves to the living in Mediumship, they appear in a mode wherein space itself seems cut-up, as if the dead carry space, or a particular milieu with them. They don’t move across space, because *they are space*, the intensification of space as it is compressed into mobile de-localized segments, attached to moments in time. This ‘particular’ space, then, is set against a homogenous space—any-space-whatever—that is general, nonspecific, and can be easily quantified/cut up. The car can’t go forward because it contains those who are cut-out of civil society, for whom the fantasy, if that is the word, of homogenous space does not apply, or rather, appears only as a negation of the possibility of movement, as space emptied-out, and in which there is no way forward, no way out. These are arrested movements, a form of “leaping in place,” that involves a more subtle transformation, unsettling the forward, linear directionality of settlement. (Deleuze, LOS)
2.8. Bob’s House, Lily Dale

Bob got a call one day from a lady—she had learned from others that Bob had a reputation for working with the “trumpets.” To work with the trumpets during a séance is to get the spirits to levitate, or move the trumpets with the goal of generating an spirit-voice box in the trumpet through which the spirits can speak on their own (that is, without the voice of the Medium).

She asked me if I could heal her son—said he has a brain tumor. I told her, well we’ll pray for you and then we talked a while and before I got off the phone, I said “Your son is gonna be ok.”

Bob gathered seven people together and they prayed every night for six nights from 9-9:30. Distant praying its called—everyone praying at that time from their home, those in Lily Dale, and even those in other states. During this six day period Bob got a number of calls from the parents. They said they saw a golden light coming from the boy’s room at night. The father later said he heard laughter — his son’s laughter — and didn’t want to disturb so he didn’t open the door to the boys room. Another phone calls: This time the boy tells the parents, I see angels and Indians, and wants to go to bed just so he can see them again. The parents informed Bob that the boy had felt better during those six days of prayer, “cheerful and in less pain.” Meanwhile, Bob had been visited by his spirit guide, Sitting Bull.22

One night he came which was typical, it’s always a conversation, and instead of his regular headdress that he usually has on, he was wearing an all white robe, or almost like an all white suit. And I looked at him with a wink in the eye and said, “looks like your all dressed up to

22 Sitting Bull, we might recall, was the Lakota Sioux Medicine man who, among other things, played a significant leadership role in the Ghost Dances.
“You know where I’m going!” And later that night Sitting Bull admonished Bob saying: *You worry too much, you need to stop worrying and have faith!* Bob seemed affected by this admonition in his retelling. The next day the father called and said to Bob, *You know, I’m catholic and you know we don’t believe this stuff*, Bob turns to me... *Cause you know, the Church is against talking to the dead. But Spiritualism is not a religion, what matters is the outcome, the healing.*

*The family was so grateful they called me like 40 times in one day. They said “who are you? That you healed our son like this” and I said, “I’m just a guy who mows lawns here—I don’t want your money.”* He refused to ask for or take payment, though he did invite them to visit Lily Dale when they could, said he would like to meet the boy one day. Later the boy, age 9, called Bob and said “*thank you, the pain is all gone,*” to which Bob, full of emotion said “*ok, I’ll have to call you back.*” I was overcome, he told me, and began to tear up. *I just kept thinking what if I hadn’t answered the phone that day... where would that boy be... he’d be on the other side.*

*The doctor said the tumor was the size of a golf ball initially and on second examination had completely disappeared! “I’ve never seen anything like it,” said the Doc. “I’ve heard about it but I’ve never seen anything like it.” He told the parents, “just take your boy home already and have a party or something cause you don’t need to stick around here [the hospital]. There is no tumor so there will be no need for surgery.”* While Bob and I sat on a bench outside of the big Auditorium that summer, he telling his story, me listening intently, another older couple came and sat right next to us on the bench… only they began to doze off in the afternoon sun, completely un-phased by Bob’s story, apparently not finding it out of the ordinary.
Bob and I became friends. The first time we met was on a rainy day in late spring at the Cafeteria, just as the summer “season” was beginning. He always returns to that initial meeting as serendipitous. And it was, somehow. I had been hearing, just the day before, rumors from other mediums concerning a secret séance circle that had been meeting in the Dale and getting “all kinds of physical phenomena” — led by a man named “Bobby” who worked with trumpets. Physical mediumship was not allowed in the Dale, or rather had fallen from repute and thus was no longer practiced — the common practice upon which mediumship here is centered, is “mental mediumship,” involving giving “messages” to people who come from all over the country to hear from their dead relatives. It had rained for the third day in a row and was storming outside... it was a moment in the day when not much was going on in the Dale, otherwise following its summer routine of Spiritualist services, public messages given at the “stump,” otherwise “demonstrations of mediumship,” and Healing Services. For a town where nothing ever happens and no one ever dies, there sure is a lot going on.

That day, I didn’t feel like “doing fieldwork,” I sat in my room, lonely, distracted and tired. Finally, I decided to wander over the to Sunflower cafeteria for a late lunch. One often sees the sunflower as an emblem of Spiritualism in churches and around Lily Dale, because the sunflower, I am told, always turns to face the sun — and Spiritualism, one of its typical services closing with, “in love and light!” is a religion that follows the spiritual “light,” the light of the soul.

A small man, bald with a touch of grey hair on the sides of his head approaches me while in line and asks what I’m doing this week, if its my first time to the Dale, the usual. He is smallish in stature probably well into his seventies. Bob tells me that he has lived here all his life, and so I gathered he is one of the multi-generational spiritualists who still live around here.
Shyly he asked me if I sit in ‘a circle,’ and if I’m interested in physical phenomena. Yes! I said, and added that I’ve never really seen any... “We set in a circle every Sunday, would you like to join?” I was blown away by this unusual offer. Bob insisted I join he and Tim at their table for a cup of coffee, so I sat down with them and they talked without pause, lingering over cups of black coffee. And they have stories to tell! The brothers told me they have been sitting in a physical circle for 50 years, every Sunday. Tim was the talker, lamenting about how these days because of the technology and everybody being in such a hurry, no one can develop the old physical phenomena like they used to. Today it’s all about money and the quality of the mediumship is awful. It used to just be donation based. They don’t even come near it today. People are flitting around, and they don’t take the time and the commitment to sit with spirit. If you can’t get it [physical phenomena] in a week they’re not interested — they want it here and now — Boom! He claps his hands together for effect. Because you can make an “appointment” with spirit — and they will show up! But you have to keep your appointments—it’s a practice in dedication. Nowadays mediums only sit for development and until they reach that point where they can read and give messages. Then, Stop! Nothing more... they hang the shingle on the door and that’s it. They stop. Computers, iPods, TV all these things today... When we were sitting we would get a group together [of Mediums]. One could do apports [the materialization of objects] the other could do materializations [of spirits], another could do [automatic] writing,...you’d get a group together and set [sit] like every Friday... each would do their mediumship and they you have a little something to eat afterwards. And that’s the way we would do it. It used to be good... back in the 60’s. Tim asked if I had ever seen a transfiguration — I said once... with William. He said, that is good, but that’s nothing! I’ve seen the full face of Lincoln, with the top
hat and everything appear before a mediums face! An ectoplasmic mask... We just don't get that kind of phenomena these days!

I noticed on the many occasions I spent time with Bob, that he often spoke of his Indian guide(s), as if every moment were punctuated by an invisible third party presence between us. His conversation was always dimpled with “they said” references; “they said” last night that you are a “good person,” that you will be developing your mediumship here… “They said” that if we sit with the trumpets its going to be “good.” Bob it should be noted, is not a medium — at least not officially. And one has to be an official medium, that is, accredited, having passed the exam administered by the Lily Dale Assembly, to be a practicing Medium with a sign hung on your door authorizing you to charge the public for mediumistic messages on the grounds of Lily Dale, not to mention to become a member of the Assembly.

Bob mostly kept to himself and had a few odd jobs, one being that he mows the lawns of all the quaint Victorian Medium’s houses lining the streets of Lily Dale. He lives in a good sized house within ‘the Dale,’ and spent most of his life there, as did his brother, Tim who is married. They are fixtures around the Dale, as I came to understand, and Bob is known by almost everyone that lives there. The older Mediums who have known him for years, just refer to him by his childhood name, “Bobby.” The mediums tell me, although he leads such a simple life, he has a lot of money… just sits on it or buys mowers with it — his house hordes equipment of all kinds. Such is the gossip anyway. But Bob did mention a number times that he has many mowers — just buys them and stock-piles them in his garage. I began to imagine him at times, in manner and stature, like a dwarf in a fairy tale, hoarding his gold and somehow mysteriously showing up to ‘make a deal’ at the most serendipitous moments. And that was his tendency, and since serendipity is ubiquitous in ‘the Dale,’ it seemed to me that every time I had a thought
about Bob, he would suddenly appear. He often invited me to circles and I often felt I was being added to a collection of shiny objects. He was fond of mentioning all the famous people that would join his ‘circle’ over the years… and the various stories mostly attesting to his success as a trumpet medium.

The brothers, Bob and Tim, are also known for their Spiritualist pedigree, having grown up in Spiritualism and with a famous aunt, Katherine Baxter, known for her trance paintings and “direct voice” phenomena. Katherine used to channel “direct voices all around her, within her aura -- numerous voices coming from different directions.” She would stand up in front of the whole auditorium and give entire lectures for hours under “trance,” channeling the voices of spirits. The brothers thus “belong” to the history of Lily Dale. Tim spent an afternoon over coffee, a photo album spread between us at the local “caff” [cafeteria], telling me of his Aunt Katherine who channeled this spirit called “Don,” a 17th century flamboyant French painter.

*While in trance, eyes closed, she would pick up a brush and begin to paint portraits — always portraits. I have one she did of the artist “Don,” the spirit she channeled in trance.* The famous paintings hanging in the Maplewood hotel at Lily Dale, one of Abe Lincoln, and a very large portrait of Azure the Great, both by the Campbell brothers, and as previously described, are typical of what is called “precipitated painting”: a feat in physical mediumship whereby the medium goes into trance and without touching brush or color, paint begins to appear on the canvas before her. According to Tim, Katherine’s paintings were not “precipitated” but painted under trance by her own hand, when the artist “Don” from the 17th century would occupy her body. *And he smoked and spoke French all the time, so Katherine would smoke cause he smoked…and she hated smoking! She had an orange cut by her easel so that when she came out of trance she would bite into it to kill the taste of the cigarette… and in one of her [Spiritualist]*
philosophy classes she had a student who spoke French, — and since she didn’t speak French herself, and had no idea what Don was saying through her, she had her student come one day while she was in trance, and tell “Don” to “STOP SMOKING!” She so hated how she felt afterward.

Katherine Baxter both “forgot” what she did and said under trance, while speaking in a foreign language, and painting with a foreign hand. She had arthritis Tim went on, and I wouldn’t even let her color in my coloring book cause she couldn’t stay in the lines. She was all crippled up... couldn’t stay in anything... but when in trance, man... fantastic! Her eyes were closed the whole time, Bob added.

Katherine also made the painting hanging in Bob’s Northwinds’ house that he allowed me to stay in the following summer. At the rear of the living room was a spirit painting made by Bob’s aunt of an Indian “chief.” We stepped inside the house built in the late1800’s. It was cozy with hard wood floors and a large stone fireplace. There is a big Indian in the Séance Room! Bob said, apropos of nothing. Do you mean the sculpture of an Indian I saw in your séance room? I asked, referring to a large wooden statue of an Indian, strangely seated on a parlor chair. No, he lives here – he’s the protector of the house. So if you hear anything at night or anything, don’t worry cause it's him. Bob winked. I pushed the subject, Why is he there? Is he your guide? No he just came with the house – just stays. I think the medium that lived here before, he was her guide and he just stayed, Bob responded. What’s his name? I asked. White Feather.

White Feather is one of many popular Native American guides, like Sitting Bull, Red Cloud and Silver Birch, the last being the ‘guide’ of the aforementioned English Spiritualist writer, Maurice Barbanell. As mentioned, White Feather is also the spirit more recently known for his teachings through the English trance Medium, Robert Goodwin (whose writings Bob may
or may not be aware of). I imagine, like Sitting Bull, White Feather makes many appearances as one of the more generally known Indian spirits.

The whole *Northwinds* house I now realize is dedicated to White Feather. There is a wooden carved eagle on the eave of the house and one in the kitchen, and the séance room is filled with kitschy Native American paraphernalia. Beyond the living room where the painting of another unnamed Indian hangs, the one painted by Katherine Baxter, and inherited by Bob, there is a small sitting room dedicated to séances. This room has an antique desk or writers bureau in the middle of the main wall, and upon this there sits a trumpet — the strange contraption made up of lightweight aluminum canonical tubes, which interlock, layered upon one the other, so as to make it collapsible. Extended it looks like a metal megaphone with a band of light sensitive fluorescent tape around the bottom circumference so that it can be seen moving when the lights are off, in dark séance rooms. Adjacent to this bureau is a chair upon which sits a large “tom tom” drum, with the painted face of a wolf with yellow eyes that stares back at me from the darkened room. A large statue of an Indian, carved out of wood sits in another chair. The chairs are thus occupied. Next to this, another chest of drawers, in which all the drawers are mysteriously half opened. The spirit certainly had a room laid out for him… and he was, according to Bob, still present — *he just stays* — lingers on, even though the medium he had aligned himself with is long gone… even the chairs are permanently occupied by figures of animal and Indians.

It was not unusual to hear of spirits inhabiting the houses of the Dale, though in this case it struck me as odd that the spirit lingering on was an “Indian.” The ubiquitous presence of Indians in the séance rooms from the mid to late 1900’s, had long ceased to be the ‘ground’ of Spiritualist presences — and yet, there are traces still that point to a larger significance of the
Indian spirit in the formation of a uniquely Spiritualist movement, with its roots in the
Jacksonian era of Native American removal, but also to the role of the Indian in authorizing the
mediation of American spirits by the settler Medium.

Referring to the circle he attends regularly where they work with the table and the
trumpet, Bob recalls: *Once he [the Native spirit] had a pow-wow with us and with the tom toms.*
*They put one right in our hand. They floated toward you? I asked. Yes... and they would start
beating on them... The harmonica would be floating and music coming out of it... and they
would give us a lecture. Maybe it would last two, two and a half hours, but it would feel like only
two minutes!* Bob has made the comment before that time is condensed – *an hour of “sitting with
Spirit” just feels like a few minutes.* A friend of Bob’s, Ned, a resident who sits regularly in a
“circle” for physical mediumship with Bob, his wife and a few others who live in Lily Dale,
work mostly with “with the table,” and when Bob is present, the trumpets. Working with the
table, refers to what is known as “table tipping,” where one creates a simple code with the spirits,
who answer back ‘yes or no’ by making the table move in one direction or another. One day
during a table sitting he invited me to attend, Ned said to me: *I was surprised about the Native
American guides myself, cause I thought, we took everything away from them – everything ---
why would they want to protect us? ... But that just shows how much you change and forgive on
the other side.* He added that Native American spirits usually play the role of the *Protector spirit*
— one who acts as a *gatekeeper* during trance, or any other mediumistic contact (such as
working with the table), to bring the other spirits through. The Native American spirit thus
makes sure no “lesser” or troublesome spirits — and by this they also mean angry, punitive, or
trickster spirits whose communication is not of the “highest” order — come through and is, in a
sense, the first spirit through which other spirits must pass to gain access to the medium. *The*
Native Spirits are usually the first one’s in [the Circle]. There is always a Native Spirit that ‘shows up.’

2.9. Settlements Unsettling: The dead as Family Record

The violence by means of which the nation was forged and defined must be forgotten so that it can be reimagined as “family” history — the history of the nation.”

— Scheckel, The Insistence of the Indian: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Culture

“By means of the family photo, a whole map of the world.”

— Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature

In 1819 Henry Clay, then Speaker of the House, made these reflections about the situation of the Indian.

We are powerful and they are weak…To use a figure drawn from their own sublime eloquence, the poor children of the forest have been driven by the great wave which has flowed in from the Atlantic ocean to almost the end of the Rocky Mountains, and overwhelming them in its terrible progress, has left no other remains of the hundreds of tribes, now extinct, than those which indicate the remote existence of their former companion, the mammoth of the New World [Italics mine]. (Scheckel 1998)

The “great wave” Clay refers to—a wave washing over, naturalizing the action of the state and settler with a single metaphor—culminates in an equivalence between the extinction of the “hundreds of tribes,” and that of the “the mammoth” or buffalo, “Indian” and animal. As Scheckel points out in The Insistence of the Indian: Race and Nationalism in 19th century

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24 Deleuze, Guattari 1986, 11.
American Culture, the tone of “regret and resignation” is “typical of nineteenth-century political rhetoric on the Indian question,” which reinforces the inevitability, even as it expresses sadness at the decimation of the Indian tribes (Scheckel 1998, 4).

The “wave” of settlement’s extension across space, I want say, has the corresponding effect of producing remainders that return. They return as spectral figures, aggregate affective repetitions that are intensified in and through the body as “presences.” Derrida says of the specter that it is always “revenant” — that which returns or repeats; but more precisely, the specter is that which begins with a return (Derrida 1994). Every beginning is marked by a before, as returned past. So in the beginning, at the foundation is something spectral: for in the act of settling down, or beginning, that which was before is cleared, the land and its inhabitants. Which means in any clearing there is already a return, the spectre of repetition constitutive of foundation.

At the founding moment of settlement we find the House, and here that most Puritan of houses, described by Hawthorne in The House of Seven Gables, which holds the past in its bones. It hides its usurpation of what and who came before, by its very solidity, “ponderously framed and calculated to endure for many generations of his [the proprietor’s] posterity” (1913, 9). The House as foundation makes you forget its beginnings. The prehistory of Hawthorne’s story of settlements usurpations begins with a family history and the building of a “stalwart”: Puritan house, by no less an imposing man of war and industry, whose “rigidity of purpose” was unwavering, “common-sense as massive and hard as blocks of granite.” This figure, Colonel Pynchon, builds a house whose very foundation hides the murder of the one who held the land before, Matthew Maule—a simple man who tilled the land and owned it by right of his labor. Maule is usurped by the man of industry, the holder of wealth, Pynchon, who builds a house of
posterity to hold his legacy. Befitting Puritan history, Pynchon gets Maule out of the way by accusing him of witchcraft, through which Hawthorne recalls the reader to the Salem witch trials.

Here, Hawthorne implicates the witch trials in the haunting of settlement, with its logic of clearing and returns. In Hawthorne’s illuminating conflation of witchcraft and property disputes, the body of the witch, as both actual and spectral, haunts the foundation upon which the Lockean social contract will be built. The foundational scene(s) of settlement are linked to the repetition of settlement’s spectral returns: first with Maule who claims his land by right of labor, yet is haunted by the spectres of Indians as displaced inhabitants, then by Pynchon, who clears Maule’s house to build a house for posterity, which is in turn haunted, for generations to come, by the ghost of Maule. The spectral body haunts the land, first as wilderness equated with the “demonic” figure of the Indian, and then as the ghost of usurped property. So, it is the doubleness of the body and the fear of its spectral returns, itself embedded in the logic of settlement, that constitutes settlement’s spectral supplement. Spectral bodies thus stand as cloudy witnesses to settlement’s displacements at its very foundation: to the usurpation Indians, and the clearing of land to make property. The spectre is thus also a haunting testament to the failures of settlement to clear the land of Indians and Witches.

For clearing is, again, always marked by a return—cleared by the simple settler of the Indian, “hewn form the wilderness” by his labor, only to be cleared again by the man of wealth and industry who symbolically and actually murders the laborer to gain his property, erecting a new foundation whose very appearance makes you forget its original usurpations:

There is something so massive, stable, and almost irresistibly imposing, in the exterior presentment of established rank and great possessions, that their very existence seems to give them a right to exist; at least so excellent a counterfeit of right, that few poor and humble men have right to question it, even in their secret minds [italics mine]” (25)

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25 See my emphasis on the accusation of the witch as having a double or “spectral body” as connected to “spectre evidences” in the Salem with trials in my essay “Spectral Bodies of Evidence” (Yerby 2016).
There is a forgetting at the beginning. The foundation of settlement appears so solid, as if it had always been…but every beginning hides a past. The story of what is settled and what is vanished or elided from the myth of the American frontier, is found in the after-life of its many “counterfeit[s] of right”: the errant simulacra, spectres, phantasms, ghosts such false claims give rise to. Every beginning is a return. That is why the appearance of a spectre invokes, in its very revenance, the fact of every beginning as a return. Yet what returns also makes a difference within the present—makes something else possible, something that exceeds the foundational moment of beginning. It is as if the past returns as already future, cutting up the present at both ends—the present, as Deleuze says, is but a “sliver” divided between past and future, which are reflected in the present, as if through a crystal (Deleuze 1990). In the beginning, then, was the difference of the beginning—that which repeats. Differential repetition is itself spectral, I want to say, or rather, is the return of spectres who bring back the past, although always differently, because always appearing within a different present. As Heraclitus said, you can never step in the same river twice, or something like that: the spectre appears again and again, but always in a different river of the present, and thus actualized differently. And concerning the body of a Medium beset by specters, we might ask: to what future does the return of the spectral dead call us, as so many crystalline figures that haunt the body and insist on being invited in?

If the “Indian,” to use the generalizable term of settlements “other,” is the most prevalent spectre of settlement’s clearing, the Indian is never just an Indian but is marked from settlement’s beginning by a doubleness: actual and spectral, living and dead, enemy and noble savage, child of nature and demon of the wilderness. As Renee Bergland writes:
When European Americans speak of Native Americans, they always use the language of ghostliness. They call Indians demons, apparitions, shapes, specters, phantoms, or ghosts. They insist that Indians are able to appear and disappear suddenly and mysteriously, and also that they are ultimately doomed to vanish. Most often, they describe Indians as absent or dead (Bergland 2000, 1).

And, as I have said, a veritable spectralization of Indian bodies runs like a thread throughout American history and letters—beginning with the Puritans for whom Native Americans embody “demonic manifestations of an internalized psychic struggle.” However, that is exactly what is at stake—that specters are never just internal, but ambiguously shift between external and internal spaces, public and private, nation and subject, mind and body, haunting the very divisions that would safely sequester them. As Ann Kibbey points out, because the spectral bodies of Indians inhabited the inner psychic space of Puritans, as dangerous Shapes of the devil, not unlike the witches burned at Salem, there was a alignment between inner figures and actual bodies. The Pequot Indians massacred in the war of 1637, were thus thought of as Shapes of the devil literalized in fleshly bodies. Here, Puritan understandings of the body as Shape, the body in this sense always already spectralized, allowed for a transposition of internal devils to external devils, of “internal enemies” to “external enemies” (Kibbey 1986, 97-99).

The return of the Indian as “vanishing American,” seems to play a double role in constituting and unsettling American psychic space, as much as an American literary and political tradition. As Bergland puts it, “the practice of representing Indians as ghosts works both to establish American nationhood and to call it into question”(Bergland 2000, 5). To spectralize Native Americans is to “ghost” the Indian from “American lands,” and to enclose them in the “American imagination.” Settlement’s genocidal clearings, the “emptying of physical territory”—which includes the clearing of land from the animating forces of a heathen wilderness—at the same time, is the removal of Indians into “white imaginative spaces.” The effect of such
spectralization being that as the physical landscape is claimed as American territory so too is the “interior landscape” transformed into an American territory (Bergland 2000, 5).

Inside and outside, psyche and land, are both places in which Indians are enclosed—places of settlement’s spectres. But what does it mean to have Indians sequestered inside your imagination? The internalization of the frontier as a limit where the outside is met, is simultaneously an internalization of the land as such, one that makes a distinctly American subject: “by assuming the land (not the landscape but the land), the American man acquired an individualist substance” (Bergland 2000, 4). The history of actual removal, genocide, and enclosure onto reservations of Native Americans and the concomitant enclosure of the figure of the Indian within the “psychic space within each citizen,” as Bergland put it, reflects a deeper undecidability between actual Indians and spectral Indians, reflecting an ambivalence, I am arguing, around the body in general. The Indian, it seems to me, is not constructed as a spectre after the fact of settlement’s violences; rather, such phantasms, as I have tried to show, belong to the spectral nature of foundation as such, which always requires a division of inside and outside, us and them, false and true image. It is this division that makes the phantasm rise to the surface — just as in Plato, it is the law of division between eternal form and copy that makes the proliferation of simulacra a phantasmic threat: simulacra haunting and “insinuating themselves everywhere,” and reducing to shadows, the “true” forms (Deleuze 1990, 257).

The effect of such spectralization is not just upon orders of representation, but upon orders of sensation, and thus upon bodies. For what happens to bodies affected by spectres, especially when those spectres are released from the sphere of imagination? The fact that Native bodies are spectralized, returning to haunt, not only the land conquered by settlement, but the insides of American subjectivity, points to the logic of conversion whereby the outside, as external frontier,
physical SPACE and national territory, becomes inside. External space is converted to an internal experience of the body—while the spectre is the condensed image that travels across these registers. The specter is thus not only a body become animate image—or phantasm—but an intensified, internal dimension of the external topography of American space. The problem of conversion is thus already present as the Mobius strip of insides and outside of the nation—where what is excised is also incised, into an inner space where the dead remain alive and preserved. This leaves an animate kernel of trauma, an affecting presence that remains reconciled within American experience.

Space gets inside the body thus becoming an inner territory complicit, or parallel, to an external encounter. The colonial encounter of America as an external SPACE—the wilderness, the New World—must be internalized as a SPACE within, to make a new subject of American experience. And this internalization is also the internalization of the Indian, who from settlement’s beginnings is metonymically equated with the prehistory of American space, both as land of promise and risk—whether as prelapsarian nature or demonic wilderness—within which settlement takes place. The story of North American settlement, as a crossing of SPACE, first the Atlantic and then the Land in a “wave” of movement westward, finds its parallel movement in the constitution of an internal, intensive and affective SPACE of encounter.

What marks American experience, as I have said, is the disjunct of this seeming parallelism—apparent as a disjunct between inner and outer space, body and land, which is also a disjunct between the irredeemable past and the melancholic present of the nation. Spectres don’t stay safely sequestered in the imagination—they mark an excess, a remainder, in the conversion of outside to inside, of actual space to psychic space. In other words, conversion has failed. I call this problem, as reverb of hysteria, the conversion disorder of settlement. For the
hysteric is a figure who contains an excess, the affective excess of an encounter with invisible forces or traumatic returns which remain stuck in the body— they cannot, in other words, be converted to conscious experience. The traumatic images, as so many affective milieus, remain always in the present, as presences, and are repeated within an affective topography of the body—the affect gets lodged in the body where it is contained and intensified, spoken out of a semiosis of body, a stuttering language of gestures, somnabulent states, and enacted scenes. In thus conceptualizing settlement’s spectral scenes as symptoms of a conversion disorder, I want to articulate what I see as somatic signs of settlement’s inability to convert the affective history of colonial encounter, both in its violences and promises, to an internal experience that would in some way reconcile that encounter. In this regard, we must look for settlement’s spectres in places where they materialize and unsettle—here, in the context of Spiritualisms’ Indians, but also, more generally through disorderly affects, aberrant bodily gestures and the continuous “stutter” in the language of the settler body, which, in any case, remains haunted by an unassimilable remnant of affects belonging to shades of encounter that exceed the colonial narrative to which they are made to conform. At least, that is how I imagine it, and why here, I mean to show, that the mediumistic body does not so much reconcile or redeem settlement’s history, as make visible the conversion disorder of settlement as such: settlement as a problem, not just of actual history and material topographies, but of the body as a nexus of affective, spiritual and geographic encounter, composing here a specifically spiritual (spectral) geography of American experience.

The Melancholy of Settlement
The actions upon and against Native American bodies cannot be divided from the idea of Indians as spectral, for, as Freud has taught us, a wound affecting the actual body is doubled by a spectral wound that can break off, and become a traumatic figure of repetition in its own right. In this sense, Indian spectres are more than figments of the imagination—they are “real” beings, even as they have little to do with Native bodies. And in the insistence of the Indian spectre, in its many returns, evades national burial and thus mourning: “transformed into ghosts” the spectral body “cannot be buried or evaded” (Bergland 2000). The spectre persists and insists—it remains present as a repetition of a past that cannot be forgotten, because it cannot be mourned. It cannot be mourned because a spectre always remains in the present, animate, unconverted to memory, and because the repetition that marks spectrality, the spectre’s revenance, is enacted through the national scene of settlement’s repeated violence. Settlement is not a one-time event that can be laid to rest but a repeated act that materializes a set of affective and conceptual relations between lands and bodies.

The family history of the nation, Scheckel argues, must exclude its founding violence and demands a forgetting of that foundation. But this forgetting is fraught, especially in North America, where the story of independence as a fight against colonization cannot permit the thought of its own internal colonization of the Indian. Paradoxically, this forgetting is driven into the future as a “desire to remember,” to sublimate into national memory that which haunts, as “haunting marks the limits of that forgetfulness.” To incorporate that which is excised in the before, to make the family into the family, we well know, is itself a problem, as Kafka never lets us forget.26 The need to bring into “family history” the history of disenfranchise is to want

26 For to make a “family portrait” of settlements exclusions and violences, is not to right a wrong but to map the family onto everything. And here Kafka leads the way, turning everything into “family portrait”; he exaggerates Oedipus onto everything, a hyperbolization that makes the
to remember only in the service of further forgetting. How so? In order for the settler to remember and this remembrance to also be a forgetting, as Scheckel argues, the aboriginal/indigenous must incorporate the past of settlement into themselves, and I would say into their bodies, as spaces of “tradition,” holding the past for the settler, as Povinelli argues in the case of Australia (Povinelli 2002, 56) The Indian becomes a member of the family, by taking on and taking in, incorporating all that we wish to forget. And concomitantly, the settler can forget, insofar as settlement’s history is externalized—stored, I want to say, in some other body, some other container—the Indian, the aboriginal, as original container. Here the aboriginal body becomes the medium that stores the actual frontier past, as well as the vision of a prehistory of autochthonous belonging as untainted relation to the land before settlement.

Perhaps the demand on the Indian body to represent for the settler, the unchanging authentic ground of ‘ancient’ prehistory, preserved as pre-contact “tradition,” may be analogized to Aboriginal experience where embodying “tradition” becomes a demand: “You Aborigine establish an identification with a lost object. Strove after what cannot be recovered. Want it badly. We do. See us celebrating” (Povinelli 2002). Thus Povinelli shows that the embrace on the part of the “nation” of “indigenous traditions is quite different from the consequences of indigenous people embracing the same” (2002, 56).
Embracing its shameful frontier history allows the nation bit by bit to unbind itself from the memories and hopes once associated with that history, and allows the nation to get on with its business, find new ideals and images to identify with (Povinelli 2002, 56).

While the settler nation “gets on with it,” the Aboriginals are asked to identify with the frontier past and thus internalize “tradition” as the mark of their “authenticity”—which means holding this past, as loss, within the body, where the past is incubated as “what cannot be recovered:” scarred by loss in their discursive passage into being, the historical and material pressures on them to identify with the name of this passage (tradition) affectively constitutes them as melancholic subjects. [italics mine](56)

I understand this to mean that faced with the fact that the Australian nation-state judges land repatriation according to proofs of traditional continuity and aboriginal authenticity, aborigines are forced to embrace their own “traditions” as authentic sites of reference, as well as the “shameful history” of settlement, in the service of incorporating the frontier past into the body of the nation-state. The flipside of the nations embrace of “indigenous tradition” as a way of releasing itself—remembering in order to forget—from the violence and indignities of usurpation, cannot be thought apart from how indigenous bodies become bodily containers for that past. A past, as Povinelli points out, that is in direct opposition to the real “social maladies” of the present, a contradiction the indigenous body is made to hold as now melancholic subject: to hold both a synchronic pre-contact “tradition” somehow untainted by the passage, and yet also the diachronic trauma(s) of this passage.

To be incorporated into the national family, the Aborigine, as much as the Native North American, is made to hold the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten, a past transferred to the indigenous body as container of that history. And this transference is one set up for failure, as it does not allow for a proper mourning and thus remembrance of the past, and because indigenous bodies are themselves still (repeatedly) subject to the logics of settlement,
whereby their failure to represent “tradition” (as impossible demand) within themselves has consequences for the actual rights granted indigenous peoples (Povinelli 2002, 57): “She becomes authentically Aboriginal only at the moment she willingly alienates her discourse and identity to the fantastic claim that she is able to transport from the past an ancient practice (Povinelli 2002, 57).” And I want to say, the melancholic subject, embodying this impossible tension between an unchanging authentic past and an always changing present, holds within herself a dead-past that must remain animate, while, vis-à-vis this incubation, she becomes a spectre of walking death within the national present of contemporary life.

**Aberrations of Mourning**

To mourn requires substitution, said Freud. To mourn is to externalize the pain of loss onto the corpse, or some other object, as stand-in, which can then be buried and memorialized. In other words, the idea is that the pain of loss is transferred to an object or body that stands in for the loss, which can then be released. Mourning names the process by which the presence of pain, and its particular liveness as a modality of the present—I feel pain—can be converted to pastness or remembrance. The buried corpse, monument, or object, it seems, is thus charged with holding the memories of the dead and the pain of loss, by separating these out from the mourner, converting pain into events of memorialization. Converted to memory, the ambivalent feelings of loss are no longer carried by the living, as a haunting and affecting pain.

The failure, however, to convert loss to an externalized object of memorialization means mourning has failed. Affects are what is not converted to memory, and thus into pastness; affects come back, as Freud showed in the case of traumatic recollection, as an always present experience which is repeated and repeated.
The problem begins, as always, with love. In love we extend ourselves into another—the beloved who dies, or leaves us, has taken with themselves a part of us, making the line between our life and their death one of ambivalence; for in loving we have lost the greater part of ourselves: “the most cherished extension and part of the survivor” (Rickels) No longer being able to separate our hopes and memories from the corpse of the beloved, we cannot bury the dead. Mourning in such instances, becomes something else—what Laurence A. Rickels’ called, “aberrant” forms of mourning. And this “original refusal to substitute for loss,” if it continues, becomes a contradiction in itself, a life without life: “to live without taking risks, without life” (Rickels).

A state of self-entombment arises, a paralysis which is without risk, originally from the desire to die with one’s beloved: “without the proper burial of its casualties,” warns Freud, life can only become shallow and insubstantial, “like an American flirt” (Rickels 1998, 2). Here, the failure to mourn not only produces a life without risk, a life “without life,” a life that will be located within the aberrant figures of modernity, themselves atavistic to a fully formed adult stage of civilization: the savage, the hysteric, and the child. As Freud says in Totem and Taboo, savages “like children” are the “premier projectors of ghosts,” because, supposedly having no knowledge of the “natural causes of death,” the ambivalent feelings we have toward death are in this case projected outward, making the dead return as phantoms that must be either “avenged or appeased” (Rickels 1998, 16).

Melancholia is a form of self-entombment, as Freud shows in his famous essay, Mourning and Melancholia. While melancholia outwardly shares similar features with mourning—in both cases there is the loss of an object and a resulting ambivalence around this loss (either ambivalence toward the object or person itself, or toward the loss)—what separates melancholia
from mourning is the inability to externalize this loss, to withdraw from the lost object and to
置换 one’s feelings onto another (Freud 1989). Instead of this affective withdrawal, which
marks the end of a long and painful process of mourning as the strand-by-strand unraveling of
the threads uniting us to the one we love, the melancholic internalizes the relation to the lost
object. The lost object, thus internalized, is identified with the ego itself, making the ego, the
object: “thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged
by a special agency as though it were an object, the forsaken object [italics mine]” (Freud 1989,
249)

It is almost as if the melancholic inverts the logic of fetishism, for in the fetish an external
object is animated, made to hold the affective charge of a relation between the ego and an
invisible god, spirit, etc., while here the ego itself is made the object containing the invisible, yet
animate forsaken love object. In this sense the love object is never lost, but held within the body
of the melancholic, where, entombed, it retains its strange animacy. And here Freud says,
melancholia as a figure of ingestion and incubation has its roots in the undecidability between an
original narcissistic identification, and the love of an external object, for the ego in its earliest
phases, “the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development,” wants to “incorporate the
object into itself […] by devouring it” (Rickels 1998, 250). It is in this sense that melancholia is
called “an ancient form of mourning” (Rickels 1998).

Melancholia departs from mourning, in its particular address to the self, as the
internalization of loss. Yet keeping the loss alive has the effect of killing the ego. And
melancholia’s effects, like its causes, are expansive, says Freud, because its causes have a “much
wider range than those of mourning, which is for the most part occasioned by the real loss of the
object by its death [italics mine]” (Freud 1989, 250). Melancholia is a multiplier of aberrant
affects: it multiplies its effects because it “behaves like an open wound,” a wound that draws everything into itself (Freud 1989, 253). For this reason, the object which has been entombed in the survivor is less clear, and sometimes, Freud remarks, its identity eludes the person altogether—we no longer know what we’ve lost, just that we’ve lost.

Freud, argues Rickels, failed to connect the melancholic internalization of the dead within the body, to the externalization of the crypt in the form of ghostly projection. Melancholia, says Rickels, internalizes the dead within the body as an “inner crypt,” where the body as container for holding our relation to the dead is considered the flipside of the projection of ghosts. Through his exploration of various forms of internal and external crypts, as well as the mediatized extension of these, Rickels addresses the ways in which the desire to preserve the dead, to hold onto them in one form or another, exceeds the general Oedipal structures of psychoanalytic thought (1998, 3). In Rickels’ reading of Freud, two different figures emerge as responses to loss: the primal man and the modern man. The “primal man, doubled over with the first bout of ambivalence, conceived spirits and other forms of afterlife and thus anticipated for the first time, the need to mourn.” By contrast, “modern man’s ambivalent reception of death produces, in isolation from any channel or outlet of occult or psychological reflection, only neurosis.”

The link between mourning and ghosts is an old one, says Rickels, for “most ancient theories of ghosts see the specter as a dead person who has been improperly buried, or to whom performance of mourning rituals and presentation of sacrificial offerings are still owed” (Rickels 1998, 4) But melancholia is also an ancient form of mourning, argues Rickels, and has to do with the spectre of irredeemable loss—like the loss of a child. Thus the mother’s body is one of the oldest containers of internalized loss (Rickels 1998). Drawing in part on the work of Nicolas Abrahms and Maria Torok, Rickels locates within the melancholic subject an internal crypt in
which the dead, who have not been externalized but internalized, are held in a death-space within
the body, incorporated into the melancholic subject.

The crypt, they argue, contains the objective counterpart of the loss reconstituted from
recollected words and images; what is thus reanimated remains a complete person with
his own topography, including the traumatic incidences and accoutrements which made
incorporation necessary and introjection impossible (Rickels 1998,14).

Melancholia thus names the internal containment of spectres, undead presences, living on inside
the bodies of the living. Here, the object of loss remains un-dead but as “a complete person with
his own topography.” While in projection, the ghosts are externalized as spectres outside the
body, in incubation, spectres are internalized within the internal crypt of the melancholic body.
The melancholic state, today mostly viewed as a banal state of depression, becomes the stuff of
science fiction: bodies that retain the dead within them, holding the “words and images” of the
dead, even the colors, sounds, and landscapes that belonged to lost milieus—an entire
topography of the dead. In a strange inversion, to return to Povinelli’s idea of the Aborigine as
melancholic subject—the so-called “savage” is no longer the projector of ghosts, but the one
who internalizes the nation’s ghosts, becoming a container for the spectral topographies of
“ancient law” and tradition. What then, we might ask, is the Medium’s role, as one who also
internalizes ghosts?

The cases of hysteria, as described by Freud, exemplify, to my mind, the drama of such
incorporation. Here I return to the “inner theater” of Anna O. (my favorite example) whose
traumatic scenes are like films unfolding within her, retaining their own animate landscapes.
What melancholia shares with hysteria, according to Freud in Mourning and Melancholia, is the
identification of the ego with the object of loss (Freud 1989). But in hysteria, unlike melancholia,
the object is not absorbed into the ego—there is no “narcissistic abandonment” of the object-
cathexis—rather, the object as site of cathexis remains in the body, where it “persists and manifests its influence [...] usually confined to certain isolated actions and innervations” (Freud 1989). In other words, while the melancholic completely, and narcissistically, identifies the object with the ego—assimilating the lost object—the hysteric maintains an, however painful relation, to the love object in its autonomy, which remains lodged, in a sense, in her body. I want to say here that hysteria, as a way of inhabiting the relation to the dead, makes visible the insistent presence of the spectral dead as animate affective attachment in and through the body—and this, without converting the dead/lost object either to an external object as the site of memorialization, or for that matter fetishization, nor by internalizing it, like the melancholic, into the ego. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, and his earlier work on hysteria, Freud talks about the return of the past in the mode of presence in cases of traumatic neurosis—that is, the past returns as an always-contemporary experience that has not been converted to memory (Rickels 1998, 8).

The work of the analyst, says Freud, in Studies in Hysteria, is to help the patient with the painful work of “recollection,” whereby what was inside must be drawn outside—to “record in order to erase.” Bubbles of affective recollection, words holding worlds of intensities, are thus burst, or that is the idea anyway. Thus hysteria too, may be thought of a form of aberrant mourning, and Freud relates hysterical repetition to the spectres of the dead noting the link in “repetition compulsion to demonical possession, and those afflicted by traumatic neurosis to the haunted; because they seem to be under occult influence they are, in fact, uncanny” (Rickels 1998). If in hysterical neurosis, the analyst, by means of the talking cure, draws out these inner scenes, as I have said, as so many traumatically charged bubbles, bursting their affective charge, mourning,
says Freud, follows a similar process: “carrying out this retreat from the object in all those situations in which it was the recipient of a high degree of cathexis” (Rickels 1998, 7).

In aligning melancholia with haunting, Rickels’ draws out the liminal and excluded Geistesgeschichte itself haunting psychoanalysis. While always relegated to the prehistory of adulthood, whether in being ascribed to the state of childhood, to savagery, or to hysteria, the story of phantasmic projection is here aligned with adult melancholic incubation (Rickels 1998, 12). The stakes of mourning are high. What is not mourned is entombed—not only the lost object or the dead, as still animate spectres, but the survivor too, is entombed, becoming a living tomb for the dead. What is at stake is not only the continuity of an individual life, but the means by which collective life is maintained as culture, as Freud seems to say: “the mourner’s own survival—indeed, the continuation and growth of culture—would be imperiled if the period of mourning […] did not come to some definite conclusion” (Freud 1989, 2). If nothing else, this cryptology of melancholia forces us to think about the melancholic internalization of the past, as Povinelli has pointed out with regard to aboriginal and, here, I am saying in relation to the Native American bodies and their internalization within a national “family portrait.” And what does the spectralization of the Indian mean then, within North American history? Is the Medium who mediates spectral Indians, then too, a melancholic subject?

In any case, this cryptology, emphasizes the body as a container mediating the unmourned as spectral remains, which are then either assimilated, as in melancholia as narcissistic identification, or not, as in hysteria where assimilation fails. In the hysteric the spectre persists in

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27 The task of mourning is to slowly and painfully “detach the survivors’ memories and hopes from the dead.” As a step-by-step “separation from the object,” this must occur slowly, “effected at each way station, before each niche within the memorial architecture” (Rickels 1998, 7). The aim of this painful step-by-step process is to arrive at an externalization of our attachments; all that the survivor attached to the dead must be “reassembled outside the mourner, in the form of funerary rites and monuments addressed to the idealized dead” (Rickels 1998, 7).
its own right, albeit, still in a continued relation to the body that feels “too much.” I find it interesting that the very figures counted by modernity as atavistic markers of magical thinking and ghostly presence—children, savages and hystericss—should also be figures in whom or through whom an aberrant mourning is visible.

Adorno and Horkheimer have their own account, in Dialectics of Enlightenment, of the failure of modern mourning, what they call a “theory of ghosts.” This theory of ghosts, it seems, is really a theory of “disfigured” mourning, symptomatic of modern enlightened repression and sublimation (Adorno, Horkheimer 1997, 215). The ghost is always already sublimated in two ways by the enlightened subject, either, first, through excessive mourning, an “over zealous” and “busy cult of the deceased,” which rearranges all of life around the one grieved, or, second, through what they call a “forgetting rationalized as tact,” the measured sentiment of quiet, tight lipped control in the face of loss that scarcely acknowledges death at all. Revealing, is their mention of a dialectical remainder within enlightenment’s failure to mourn the dead in the “unsublimated belief in ghosts,” which “continues unabated in spiritualism” (1997, 215). This mention of modern spiritualism as an unsublimated remainder, or to use E.B. Tylor’s concept, “survival”—something that should have been sublimated by civilization but instead, stubbornly remains—connects the spirits mediated by modern Spiritualism to modernity’s failure to mourn. Thus one of the effects of failed mourning, of disfigured or aberrant mourning, is to make the past return as spectre.

What is perhaps most important here is the connection Adorno and Horkheimer make between a disfigured mourning and experience. “Our disturbed relation to the dead,” they say, is one of the “symptoms of the sickness of experience today” (1997, 216). Attributing our problem with mourning to our “repression of history,” both collective and individual, makes the
disfigurement of mourning one of the “symptoms of the sickness of experience”: life ceases to be considered in its fullness, that is, the “the unity in history of an individual” is exchanged for “a mere sequence of instantaneous experiences which leave no trace,” and remain disconnected (1997, 216). This failure to unite one’s experiences has its condition in the repression of the traces of experience.

The trace of life, that which becomes past by virtue of it no longer being part of the instantaneous present, must then be expelled—or hated as “something irrational, superfluous, and ‘overtaken’ in the literal sense of the word” (1997,216). The past, or history in general, say Adorno and Horkheimer, makes “modern men nervous, so the past becomes a source of anger” (216). But more mystifying is his following remark, that “the past of a human being makes them [these modern people] furious” (Adorno, Horkheimer 2002, 179). Modern subjects are burdened by our own past as much as the past of others. And if what links the past to the present is one’s experience, to hate the past is to be unable to convert what happens to experience as such.

In this way, the successive present accrues as something—disturbed affects—that cannot become experience. I take Adorno here to be gesturing at what Deleuze has also called, the problem of “belief in the world,” or better put, the fact that we don’t believe in the world, and thus in our own experiences (what happens to us) and thus in the immanent link between ourselves and the world (Deleuze 2001). Now, this world, the world that, to use Adorno’s language, leaves a trace that is disowned and repressed, presents itself to us, who hate the past, as a world of shadows, the spectral trace of something not quite living. The world is a shadow play—a “life without life” to borrow Freud’s words—of something more real, not here, never

28 Note this is a different translation, by Edmond Jephcott, than the one used previously.
here. And doesn't Deleuze say that our inability to believe in this world lies in part because it appears to us as a “bad script”? (Deleuze 2001). We are living the bad script, the lesser film, that appears more real to us than life. Something has become disconnected, a link between the individual life and the world, as our cruelly optimistic belief in transcendent narratives exemplifies. An immanent world is not a world without spirits, but a world thick with spirits, spirits that have not lost their relation to the bodies they emerge from—spirits not abstracted to an elsewhere, never here, or for that matter ingested and assimilated as melancholic neurosis.

The failure to integrate the dead into present life in our repression of history is ultimately, for Adorno, the cause of the disintegration of our lives, leading to a world haunted by presences (those unmourned and unmoored traces of the past, the other within and without, refusing to be ignored). If death is a problem of experience, according to Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of ghosts, what to make of the experience of those who embrace the spectre, as remainder, and refuse to sublimate the dead?

If Spiritualism falls into the “unsublimated remainder,” of modernity’s sublimation(s) of irrational “beliefs” in spirits, it is to join the ranks of figures hysterical, childlike or primitive, who house the place within the present of magical thinking and animist beliefs—including beliefs in spirits and ghosts. The belief in spirits marks the very failure of pasts to be shunned, even as spirit belief is considered something “irrational, superfluous”—the same term Adorno and Horkheimer ascribed to those untidy feelings tied to the past of the individual, which enlightenment must either put to use or repress. I take from Dialectic of Enlightenment here, a deceptively simple point: the present (as an inheritance of modern dialectics), for a specifically modern subject, is necessarily haunted by presences that cannot be assimilated into experience. Given the fact that spirit beliefs, as we all know, are not “utterly obsolete” and thus a remainder
of the failure of Enlightenment to banish the return of the past, it makes sense within this logic that *a spectrality* be accorded those figures who have been relegated to an “irrational” and “obsolete” past of civilization, as in the savage, the hysteric, the child. What desire then, what affects or repressed histories do these spectral figures, like the Indian appearing at the séance table today, still hold for us? And if we accept for a moment a general melancholic diagnosis, still pertinent today as collective depression—the present persistence of spirits, or belief in spirits seems to visibly mark the inability for the melancholic body to contain the dead. The fact that spectres haunt the present marks the failure, in a sense, of neurosis, as much as enclosed Oedipal subject of psychoanalysis, to contain the dead.

A central argument of this book, is that the Medium’s body becomes a kind of porous receptacle for the spectral returns of the past within an intentional practice of making the body itself into a space or container—as mediatic instrument—wherein these traces, as ephemeral and mostly overlooked affects and sensations, are given attention. This inner space of the body thus becomes an instrument for cultivating a certain mode of attention, and holding “information” from the spirit world. A medium at the Arthur Findlay College in England, once described the mediumistic body to me as an “archive” of experience that the spirits use to communicate with us.

By contrast, the Native or Aboriginal body, in acting as receptacle for a stored tradition, as authentic pre-contact imaginary and the frontier passage—a history of loss—as Povinelli argues, repeatedly constitutes such a body as a melancholic subject (2002, 56). If actual Native Americans, as in the example of the Australian aborigine, are constituted as figures that somehow hold the past for the settler—both the spectres of unattainable authentic tradition, and of the history of settlement’s violence—then what does this mean vis-a-vis the American
national body? Is the American settler, as national subject, also a kind of melancholic subject, since it is within the national body that both actual Native peoples and Indian spectres are entombed as living-dead figures? And what to make of the Indian spectres that return in and through the body of the living “white” Medium? Is the Medium a figure of aberrant mourning? Has she internalized and made her body into an archive for pasts that cannot be laid to rest? Aberrant forms of mourning, whether melancholic, hysterical or otherwise—present us with the problem of spectres. Spectres persist, because the dead have not be mourned. What then to make of mediumship? This is not about diagnosing the medium as a hysteric or a melancholic—but to consider how these modern symptomatologies allow us to think “critical and clinical” correspondences (Deleuze 2003).

If mediumship, as I have mentioned, treats the body like a container for the intensification and preservations of pasts, it does so as a refusal of death. The Medium, it seems to me, refuses to assimilate and thus memorialize the spectre—she insists on their persistent animacy: There are no dead! That is the message of Spiritualism. Perhaps it could be said of the Medium, in drawing the dead into her body, that she, like the melancholic, offers her body like “an open wound” which attracts the spectres into it. The now deterritorialized spirits, after all, I am saying, follow the body of the Medium. And it is often said that a good Medium will “attract” the spirits to her, because they recognize her facility in communicating their messages.

Melancholia, here names an aberration of mourning wherein the affective animacy embodied by the dead is not transferred to the corpse and buried, but persists as a traumatic kernel, kept alive inside the body of the living. The dead are kept alive, but in the body as “a stranger, a living dead encrypted in a specific place in the ego” (Rickels 1998, 10). For our purposes, this departure into melancholia gives us an image of the capacity for retention, of
making pasts *endure*, but as a “stranger” within—pasts alienated from me, or perhaps pasts I have never known. So I want to say, a similar *power of retention*, this refusal to expel what is “otherwise devoured, assimilated, and expelled by the mourning body,” seems active in Mediumship (Rickels 1998, 6). However, but instead of the affecting object/spectre lodging itself in the ego, here the spectre becomes manifest in word and image, as a communicable figure, a spirit. Moreover, as a modern religion, Spiritualism has a particular focus on the individual and individual experience; as such, mediumship relates the spirits, in the first instance, to the body, and not to an external world of sacred places, or sites of memorialization. In this way, Mediumship engages a modern problem of experience—one that finds common ground in the internalization as retention of the dead in melancholia, and the autonomy of the spectral symptom, in hysteria. Unlike the melancholic, the Medium does not forever hold her spirits inside, but incubates these only long enough to give them presence—an evidential endurance. Nor are the spectres replaced by the ego and reduced to modern neurosis; for here, the spectres remain unsumblimated as autonomous presences that “flow” through the body of the Medium. In this regard mediumship shares more with hysteria, insofar as the hysteric makes the affect connected to the loved/lost object *endure*, as an animate presence within her, yet not her own—not, in other words as narcissistic identification. While the Medium, by contrast to the hysteric, through her techniques of the body, takes measures to avoid letting the spectral object get lodged within her body as a pathological symptom.

Mediumship, I am saying, is a practice that makes visible a more abstract problem in the body—what I’ve referred to as the conversion disorder of North American settlement, as something at once spiritual, geographical and bodily. I am also interested in mediumship as a practice that precisely fails to “convert” the dead to that place in the ego then contained as
melancholic neurosis. The Medium’s capacity to retain, and yet express through the body, or bodily attention, the presence of spectral others, brings her much closer into the terrain of a hysterical symptomatology where images, words and affects are lodged in the body, but also expressed through the body. I do not wish to reduce Mediumship to hysteria, but to think the shared terrain of these aberrant figures.

Mediumship is not about redemption or reconciliation of settler histories, nor of modernity’s exclusions, but about making visible the spirit/ual conversion disorder within American experience. If specters appear at the foundation of American nation making, and American subject making, what to make of the returns of Indians, specifically within the space of Spiritualist Mediumship? Where Indian spectres haunt—not only the orchestrated performance space of the séance, but also the internal and intimate psyche of the Medium, and whose first childhood contact with the spirit world was in the figure of an Indian—to my mind points to a failure of national mourning and thus memorialization (remembering in order to forget). Far from explaining Indian spectres, mediumship only points to an unconvertible excess, in the discourse of national/melancholic/neurotic containment—the spectres after all, escape their entombment within the catacomb of the melancholic mind and present themselves as spirit personalities that take over, if only momentarily, white bodies. While the Indian as a figure is here reduced to the “noble Indian,” who reconciles and heals and thus becomes “part of the family” in Spiritualism, the family portrait is a disturbed one, I want to say, vis-à-vis the national “portrait.” For in this family, spectres are insistent in their revenance, set loose and appearing seated next to the bodies of the living.
Blowing up the Family Portrait

The Indian spectre that haunts the national “family” was never a problem of memory, whether remembering in order to forget, or forgetting to remember. What haunts is what could never be remembered, that is, converted to memory in the first place. No doubt Scheckel is right—that haunting marks the limits of forgetting, or haunting is a sign that something has not been forgotten. But what else does haunting tell us? We are haunted, the argument here goes, because we cannot properly forget—we are haunted by an indelible memory. But it seems to me it is not merely a case of forgetting to remember, but of something that was never remembered in the first place. What gives spectres the particular aspect of animacy, of an undeadness, of an affecting liveliness that endures in bodies, is owing to their status as spectral pasts still existent as a presences continuously re-presenced in the theater of settlement’s cruelties. Trauma is not about the repetition of a remembered event, but the fact that the event is always already “missed,” to use Lacan’s term (Lacan 1981). Settlement’s spectres return, as in the Indian spirits that haunt the séance, as an event of the absent/presence, because they were never converted to memory in the first place.

There is an absurdity in this national-story making which seeks to convert foundational violence to “family history.” For what haunts the contact of settlement effects a release of specters that in turn “blow up the family portrait,” as these mimic, invert and otherwise map themselves onto national territory, as that which escapes and exceeds settlement from the inside-out, refusing to be sequestered to the American psyche or memorialized as American history. The “family portrait” reveals a multitude of spectres captured in the picture. Spectres blow up the family portrait. Kafka showed how this works by exaggerating the family, as order of the Father,
the Law etc. to reveal its cracks, to make it crack-up. One way out of the Oedipal family—for one might imagine many other kinds of families—is to exaggerate it, to hyperbolize the order of the Father onto everything, to blow up the head of the family via a close-up that shows all the cracks: “the photo of the father, expanded beyond all bounds, will be projected onto the geographic, historical and political map of the world in order to reach vast regions.” (Deleuze 1986). By thus closing in upon the image of the Father, expanding the law of the Father to its logical limit, to the point of absurdity, makes the portrait crack-up. By the same logic doesn’t the attempt to memorialize into a family portrait what was never remembered in the first place, and thus persists as spectre, a gesture that the cracks the face of the national portrait?

To repeat Bergland, the spectralization of the Native American is a ghosting of the actual Indian from “American lands” and their enclosure within the “American imagination.” Yet this conversion fails to be contained. Settlement’s encounters and enclosures release more in the way of spectral forces, affects and figures, than can be contained in American territory or delimited to the sphere of imagination. The melancholic subject cannot, after all, keep the un-dead within the psyche, safely contained in the neurosis of the modern subject. The ghost escapes the crypt: spectres won’t stay inside. They are deterritorializing forces that refuse the division between physical Space and inner Image/imagination. The more you try to incorporate them, assimilate them into “family history,” here as history of the nation, the more they make of national history a parody of phantasms. Not only that, but the forgetting which the settler needs to “get on with it,” always fails to be completed. Settlement produces a melancholic subject, not only in the indigenous body, but also in the settler who as “national subject,” in some sense ingests the lost object, an authenticity that was never theirs to begin with—thus failing to put the dead to rest. Yet even this melancholic entombment fails and the dead are undead, as we see in the case of
spectral Indians haunting nation state. Settlement itself cannot mourn the violence of its foundations, refusing to right its wrongs, because its wrongs must be repeated as a condition of national sovereignty, as continuous clearing of actual and spectral others, making “settlement a [repeatable] structure not an event.”

29 Patrick Wolfe.
Part III. From House to Body: The De-localized Body as Medium

3.1. Hydesville, New York 1848

An ordinary, homely place of domesticity was imploded by strange spirit presences as if the spirits in search of a medium, a space “charged with an aura requisite to make it a battery for the working of the [spiritual] telegraph,” at long last found what they were looking for in this modest dwelling (Britten 1999, 29). The “first spirit communications” in North America, understood as the founding “event” of what would become the religion of modern Spiritualism, locates its inaugural scene in a small house in Hydesville, New York. A house “unmarked” by those tokens of progress that the locomotive generally leaves in its track” (Britten 1999, 29). This modest dwelling, we are told—not even on the railroad line—is off the path of emergent infrastructure and industry, a setting “insignificant” and of “lowly aspect” as is befitting “the birth-places of the greatest of the world’s social, political, and religious reformations” (Caldwallader 1992). The memorialization of the “scene” at Hydesville thus stresses the modesty and humble simplicity of the “small wooden house…not directly accessible by railroad”—where the spirits first made contact (Britten 1999). This should assure us, says Hardinge-Britten, that it is “the last spot” where one would find “fraud or deception […] concealment or trick” (1999). While the house as “battery of the spirit” must be free of the “sinister tricks” of technology—it is simultaneously conceived as the apotheosis of technology and animal magnetism, opening onto a higher synthesis of spirit and matter.

The house is the first locus of spiritual telegraphy: “by which invisible beings were enabled to spell out consecutive messages…” (Britten 1999). Media, has been defined, after all, as that minimal enclosure necessary for storing memory and conducting information. The house is here
the medium through which messages from the spirit world are initially conducted and is said to contain the *proper conditions* of “human and atmospheric magnetism,” pointing to “the ultimation of a science whereby spirits, operating upon and through matter, could connect in the most intimate relations the world of material and spiritual existence” (Britten 1999, 29). The house is the *battery* enabling an inter-cosmic network to be made sensible, even evidential, between a meta-plane and that of everyday existence. This inter-cosmic vision of plurality conforms to Catherine Albanese’ conceptualization of modern Spiritualists as “metaphysicians” and thus “networkers and not institution-bound religionists” (2012, 60).³⁰

The occurrence at Hydesville marks the beginning of the movement of Spiritualism. The house is the place of the beginning, where what begins—the communication of an unknown spirit to the family living within the house— is emitted through the very walls of the house itself, its bones, as much as the bones buried beneath its foundation. The house is then an infrastructure of communication, in its own right, albeit a marginal one, mediating between inside and outside, between human and nonhuman forces.

If the house is here that ‘minimal enclosure’ necessary to provide a “charged aura” attractive to spirits, this locus is displaced by the body itself, I want to say, in the moment when haunting becomes *communication*. Kate Fox, the youngest of the sisters at nine years old is credited as the first to communicate with the haunting spirit of the murdered peddler, inhabiting the house at Hydesville. In keeping with the notion that divinity manifests itself through the innocent, the unlearned, the lowly, the “guileless innocence” of Kate Fox and the simplicity of

³⁰ Albanese understands Spiritualism as a combinatorial, networked approach to religion, which included Christian and non-Christians from the start, Spiritualists were drawing, “like their colonial fore bearers,” upon “cues from blacks and Indians as well as from lingering English country magic, its European equivalents” and “the bookish high-culture hermeticism” available to them (2012; 2007, 906).
the Hydesville house is noted in all accounts. Wearied out by a succession of sleepless nights,” the Fox family had become familiar with these nightly visitations. Among the “disturbances” of the unwelcome spirit, were knockings “varied in their character, sounding occasionally like distinct footfalls in the different rooms,” as well as the presence of a body felt: “once something heavy, as if a dog, seemed to lie at the feet of the children […] Another time Kate felt as if a cold hand was on her face,” and finally the movement of furniture (Calwallader 1992, 6). One night, as the children “had become familiar with the invisible knocker,” Kate merely exclaimed, “Here, Mr. Split-foot, do as I do” (Britten 1999). Modern Spiritualism, the “advent of the greatest spiritual revelation of all times,” begins with a child’s playfulness, a girl’s mimetic response to the spirits’ “rappings” (Britten 1999). Thus it is through a form of serious play, as children understand so well, that the first “code” of spirit communication is instituted. Working its way through the bodies of the Fox sisters the first “code” of communication distinguishes itself from the noise of an invisible disturbance in the gestural “raps” with the spirit, as the girls knock-back on the walls to the unknown spirit. And, drawing in the surrounding community as witnesses to the scene, the “code” —as formed in and through the house— composes an “ad hoc infrastructure of community members and bodies” (Geoghegan 2016).

The spirit is mediated by space itself—the scalable spatial “contraction” and “dilation” from place, to house, and finally to the body, which is realized as a medium: a space and a sensory “instrument” or technology (Thacker 2014, 93). In this transition from house to body we turn from a haunted outside— the house haunted by (initially) indecipherable raps and knocks—to the body as intensified inside—occupied by an outside—spirits that have something to say. The body of the girl steps in, mediating this transition from outside to inside, house to body, through a series of playful gestures. The gesture of rapping, I’m arguing, thus marks a
transitional moment between outside and inside in the development of mediumship—from rapping, to a spirit still externally located in the house, to the spirits following the body of the medium, forming a more complex code of communication based in bodily sensation and attunement. In this foundational story of spirit communication we find the moment in which the dissolution of noise—“disturbance”—is gathered into communication, the moment in which a “spirit” is discerned—a shape or figure, emergent from the amorphous background of things felt but not seen. This materialization of the spirit is at the same time, a spiritualization of matter; the concretization of an amorphous disturbance is also the emergence of an abstract form—the becoming-figure of the spirit.

The body of the Medium, the body as medium, is the place in which spirit pasts are intensified and awakened within the present, and the coming “face-to-face” with sins of the past. There is a deterritorialization of place here—no longer emplaced in the haunted landscape, the spirits disperse to follow the modern body of the settlers’ that now ‘house’ them: in this way, the spirits are re-territorialized upon the settler’s body. As Britten points out in a passing note, the spirits followed the Fox sisters, the bodies of the girls, and as one scholar put it “jumped from one body to the next, to all three daughters in the end.” Indeed, anticipating the universalizing mission of Spiritualism, the Fox sisters received the message from the beginning that “these manifestations were not confined to them but would go all over the world” (Britten 1999).

From the house to the body to the séance-circle—Spiritualism is a universally extendable and thus adaptable plastic form encircling techniques and practices of the body that are in principle available to everyone everywhere (Cox 2003). For communication with the spirits is

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31 Geoghegan 2016. See also McGarry 2008, 31. McGarry notes that during the time of the Hydesville rappings, when Kate Fox paid a visit to her sister in Rochester, “she found that the raps travelled with her.”
first of all, as has been said, grounded in the mobile, delocalized body. The body becomes a porous container for spirit pasts to communicate with the living, to form codes of communication. And spirits too are delocalized, like moving-images that travel across time and distance or rather, across planes of existence. The now deterritorialized spectre is reconstituted as living presence, through the sensorium of the Medium’s body.

3.2. The Body as Code

The first code is a simple one. It begins with a mimetic play of raps. Kate Fox, the nine-year old girl, the first to communicate with the spirit, tells the spirit “do as I do!” and the spirit complies: “the effect was instantaneous; the invisible rapper responded by imitating the number of her movements” (Britten 1999, 8). Here, we find a binary code in the raps of absence and presence, zeros and ones, mimicking Morse’s electrical telegraph, and, more portentously, the digitization of the typewriter and computer. But this binary code quickly becomes more complicated.

Kate makes “a number of motions with her finger and thumb in the air, but without noise” [italics mine] and to her “astonishment” finds that these silent sounds are themselves “re-doubled” by the spirit as auditory knocks (Britten 1999). “Only look, mother! It can see as well as hear” […] These “words declared a truth that has already become the firm foundation of faith for an ever progressive Spiritual Church […]” (emphasis mine) (Britten 1999). In this improvement on the simple “rapping” code, the girl reveals to a future “Spiritual Church” that the spirit can see us and that we too, can and will see them.

Britten’s words retroactively secure the foundation of the “Spiritual Church,” in the moment of revelation—and what exactly is revealed? The “first manifestations did not appear to

32 Stolow points to the “striking historical and geographical coincidences between the birth of American Spiritualism and the advent of the telegraph” (Stolow 2008, 677).
the high and learned of the earth, but to the plain commonsense of an honest farmer’s wife, [Mrs. Fox] and suggested that whatever could see, hear, and intelligently respond […] must have something in common with humanity [italics mine]” (Britten 1999). The communication of a spirit that behaves like us—that can “intelligently respond”—lays a new foundation for a new commons that widens the space of the social, the realm of the communicable, across that impossible threshold—death. It is thus important that the first code with the spirits is a “common” one—one that could be understood by anyone “child and philosopher alike”; a common code communicating a-Being-in-common with the “other side of life” (Britten 1999).

This inaugural event of spirit communication grounds a “common” universalizing code with the beyond, reaching across death to be open to all—making everyone a potential Medium of the spirits. In this first communication with the spirit world, emitted through the girl’s body, the body will become a quasi-second-house as instrument of the spirits. Here, I want to imagine a strange and profound displacement at the foundation story of North American Spiritualism: the house as image of settlement, built upon settlement’s haunted clearings, is displaced by the body of the girl, as first Medium. The founding moment at Hydesville, anticipating the eventual formation of the “Spiritual Church,” begins, and extends from, the body of the girl who displaces the House as foundation. Now, the displaced spirits “follow” the de-localized body. It is an ambiguous displacement, for the internalization of the spirits in the body is both an effect of settlement’s foundational displacements, and perhaps also a disturbance of the re-peated act of foundation and thus of beginning entailed by settlements logic—for what kind of foundation can an always displaced and spectralized body be? If the body is the container of the spectral pasts, as house of the spirits, what kind of body is the Medium?

33 Cox. Cox problematizes Spiritualisms’ professed universal democracy of spirits, showing how spiritualists after the civil war imagined a racialized and segregated spirit world.

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A Collapse of Time and Space

In the girl rapping-back, the “code,” the model of the Medium as *spiritual telegraph*, is born. The origin story of Spiritualism lays out the Mediumistic body, in the “rapping” of the Fox sisters, as the transmitter of codes, *a telegraph* rapping back to an invisible recipient, somewhere “in” the house. In these beginnings of Spiritualism, the house still houses the spirit, and the body appears as a simple machine, the gestural locus of outward-communication in the form of “raps.” But already in the model of Mediumship as telegraphy, the body, like the telegraph, collapses time and space, transmitting electric currents across distances—only here, currents are transmitted through the nervous system, and across the greatest distance of all—the threshold separating life and death. In this 19th century electrical figuration of the spiritualist body, a concern with the *action* of forces on bodies *at a distance* might be located, coinciding with an interest and anxiety around the alienation of the bodily sensorium, with the emergence of ‘new media.’ Behind this fear, it seems, is the growing sense, reaching back to Mesmer, of a body governed by invisible forces, reflected in a bodily automaticity.\(^{34}\)

The cultivation of “forms of psychological attentiveness, motor readiness, and kinesthetic adaptation” which Stolow locates both within the “séance chamber” and “in the broader, media rich culture of nineteenth century metropolitan life” (2008, 684-686), drawing a parallel between

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\(^{34}\) As Jeremy Stolow points out, Spiritualist practices around “automatization and dematerialization” resonated with those occurring in the mechanization of the work place where “invisible technologies” threatened the indexical relation between bodily mediation and the “authorship” of one’s work, not to mention one’s authority. He emphasizes the role that dissociative states such as “magnetized healing, somnambulism, clairvoyance, or hypnotic trance,” played in constructing a “model” for participation in an “increasingly rationalized and mechanized factory system.” Yet, at the same time, Spiritualism gained “trust” in its “conformity” with what Stolow calls a “syntax of automatism,” itself “modeled on […] the work of electrically powered machines” (Stolow 2008, 684-686). Here demands for an automatic and passive work force, the body becoming “increasingly encased in the prosthetic shell of modern office technologies,” reflects an ambivalence around “where to locate authoritative agency in the interface between humans and machines,” or in relation to Spiritualism, human and spirits.
Spiritualist practices and the automatization of the worker, seems in part, to ignore the control exerted by Mediums who practices techniques of sensitization and dissociation. At least in the context of contemporary Mediumship, such seeming passivity is acquired through techniques of the body that seem to animate the body to its own sensory experience, as something valorized and shared, demanding an active-passivity, of “attunement,” whereby the medium takes control of the forces that affect her.

Unlike the figure of the somnambulist, led entirely by unconscious imperatives, or the hypnotized clairvoyant controlled by the Mesmerizer (usually male), the Medium is not only authorized by spirits, as many have argued, but first authorizes the spirits and internalizes the “control.” And here, I want to say, we must locate a crucial shift which takes us from the spiritual telegraph’s binary-code, realized in the “raps” of the Fox Sisters—echoing the automatic “tic tac” of the telegraph—to an understanding of mediumship as a form of passive-activity, in which communication is based in a sense of relationship to the spirit world, and the formation of a more complex code, grounded the space of inner (but not simply subjective) experience.

3.3. Instruments of Experience

“Our bodies are our instruments,” a seasoned medium from a church in New Jersey said to me — the body and its sensory techniques, become the finely tuned “instrument” upon which spirit’s communications are played. He went on to analogize the body to a musical instrument that must stay “finely tuned,” so that the communication received from spirit might “resonate.” In the simplest sense it is a two-way street between sender (spirit) and receiver (medium): “they manipulate you, resonate with you, as their instrument. But you must know your subtletest

35 The Medium in 19th century Spiritualism is a referent of authority, in Stolow’s account, primarily as the transparent and passive site for the “undistorted mediation of information.”
sensations—what is the sound resonating through me? The beat in me? They put out the information, and we have to feel it.”

“I am in control as the instrument… we are in control all the time,” a Medium, lecturing on spiritual attunement at Arthur Findlay College, on the outskirts of London, over a week-long course I attended in “Evidential Mediumship.” I was often reminded by the Mediums’ I studied with, that Spiritualists’ reject the term “possessed” to describe even the deepest trance states, for it is the Medium that is ultimately in control, permitting the communication to take place:

“because this is a shared thing... they [the spirits] are never doing anything that is inappropriate.”

Still, during trance states, it is said that the Medium “steps aside,” in order to “take on all the characteristics of the spirit”—but even in entering the closest proximity with the spirit, the Medium has acted in “cooperation” with the spirits, has “agreed” to this and is not “taken over.” During mediumistic training we are taught to protect ourselves from unwanted sensations, for example, from letting the spirit’s pain affect us too intensely, so that these sensations pass through us but do not “stick.” If you feel overwhelmed, or “if a spirit is getting on us too much we have to say NO! That is respect for ourselves and for spirit.” Sometimes, of course, even precautions such as these do not work, and a Medium finds her “energy” drained or complains of pains that persist in parts of her body where the spirits’ pain got “too close.”

“Energy,” is “the proper term,” I was told, for describing this “vital life force” that ties you to the spirit in communication—and this energy coming from the spirits is “higher” than our own, so communicating with them requires a slightly abnormal constitution: “There is an energetic component to this blending with the spirit world that is taxing to us if we are not careful.” It is as if, in such instances, the pains of empathy the Medium feels lodge themselves in her body. Energy can be high or low, positive or negative. To “raise the energy in the room,” is
often called for at the beginning of almost any mediumistic séance, reading, or message
demonstration, and usually involves singing—though sometimes only an opening prayer, the
telling of a joke, or even asking the audience to stand up and stretch their bodies. I am told half-
jokingly, again and again, that this sense of “coming down” after a reading, feeling drained
energetically after the high or “quickening” of communication so commonly described, accounts
for most Mediums’ being on the “heavy side,” and consuming large amounts of chocolate and
generally, sweets, to “raise their energy.”

In reaching forth sensorially to the spirit realm the Medium seeks a proximity in the body, as
Janet says: “you must put on the overcoat of the spirit.” This metaphor is a telling one—to put on
the overcoat means you can take it off again. The aim is to maintain a controlled proximity— we
might understand the act of decentering one’s own authority by letting the spirits take-over as a
dance in which the Medium tries always to be the lead.

The Medium thus authorizes the spirits, as communicative potentialities, into the world:
“What we do is the language of the future,” I was told. The mediation of invisible realities in and
through the body, addresses itself to a future language, as to a future world—but one that is
grounded in the authority of the Medium’s bodily experience. For the language of the future is
only transmissible and thus translatable via the code the medium herself forms with the spirits—
a code drawn from the sum of her experience. It seemed to me, throughout my fieldwork, that
most Mediums in training, came to mediumship precisely as a cure or resistance to the alienation
of de-authorizing institutions and powers—the family, the workplace, gender—and to the
alienation of increasingly disembodied forms of communication technologies. Making the body
an instrument, objectifying the body so as to differently attune oneself to its sensorium, here may
be seen as a mimetic antidote to the instrumentalization of the body. Using the bodies experience
as a “sign” of communication, the sensory background through which a “code” begins to form, is also a transition from the binary “code” of the Fox sisters’ “raps” to a language of the body, consisting of “expressive movements, paralinguistic signs, breaths and screams, and so on.”

No doubt there is a dialectic between freedom and capture when it comes to these disassociated powers of the body, but mediumship, I would argue, reveals something about the primacy of bodily mediation in registering and intensifying the place of force, making visible not only what and who affects us, but our capacity to be affected. Far from simply representing, or even expanding the logics of emergent technological apparatus,’ by analogizing these to the body as media, Spiritualist mediumship creates its own technology grounded in the experience of the body as medium. The binary logic of early spirit communication in the form of “rapping,” I am arguing, is supplanted by a language of continuously formed relations, grounded in an inner experience of images and sensations. The model of the spiritual telegraph, as a binary-code, is only a nascent and superficial understanding of the communication that goes on between Mediums and spirits. We are taught to build a code with the spirits—but upon closer examination, it turns out that this code is one’s experience itself. Mediumship is not so much a “rite of exposure,” as Taussig says of the trickery/revelation involved in Shamanism, but a “rite of experience.” It is a form of knowledge that works through sensation, and is grounded in a notion of experience as defined by the intwinement of time and space—the present of experience, and the presence occupying the body.

As such, mediumistic “experience,” distinguishes itself from memory, and in fact, the practice of mediumship requires a constant vigilance around the discernment between images drawn from memory (the mediums’ own) and those that appear as presences of an immediate

36 Deleuze 2003,79.
37 Taussig 2006,148.
sensation or affection, not coming only “from us,” but from a spiritual outside.

Thus in their *Guide to Mediumship and Psychical Unfoldment*, M.H. and E.W. Wallis, married Mediums writing in 1903 said mediumship: “requires considerable patience as well as discernment to learn to differentiate the ideas and impulses that reach him from an outside source, from those which result from the activity of his own spirit—and indeed, it is often hard to tell whether the activity of his own spirit is not due to some stimulus that reaches him from a spirit friend.”38 This “hard to tell” distinction gets trickier the more the Medium realizes that her inner images, but also the knowledge/experience attached to such images, are the language through which spirit will speak to her—thereby creating a mimetic code of meaning, based on her own associations.

Mediumship, I am saying, is an interpretive art of spiraling through the association of image and feeling, to arrive at a “code” of meaning through which one can better read these associations. If I see an ocean in my minds eye, and this for me brings up a horrible feeling of anxiety or terror—the repetition of this image experienced when I “tune in,” may become a “symbol” through which the spirits communicate; perhaps the spirit is telling me that he/she suffered a horrible experience, connected to water. The only way to discern what the spirit is conveying is through an intuitive sense or feeling in the moment—“I feel there was a boating accident”—the Medium might say, which would then be either confirmed or denied by the sitter. In becoming interpreters of the spirit, we are told first and foremost, to “pay attention to your body”—how does the image feel, but also, how does it feel in you, that is, what physical impact does it have? These subtle sensations also shift and move as the image “develops.”

The distinction between what comes from memory or imagination, and what comes from

the presence of the spirit, is in practice, a somewhat dubious one, for here a “code” relies upon a recollected image (the ocean as associated affects) to evoke a present-presence of spirit communication. In this way, the “code” is one that draws out the past, as mnemonic figures or symbols in the medium’s experience, only to convert these to signs of presence, evidences of the immediate present-presence of the spirit. More broadly, I’m trying to say, the fact that spirits (always) come to us from a lived past—the past life of the deceased person—means that what arrives as “information” of the spirits’ life is an animate pastness, one that presents itself in the mode of presence, insofar as the spirit im-presses itself upon the medium as a living-presence. In this regard, mediumship, as a form of communication, produces “codes” with forces of the past, as spectrally bodied spirits, which relies upon the failure of the past to stay past.

More confusing still, is the way the Medium both uses imagination to *fabulate* a space of communication, through explicit exercises of visualization, but then must be able to distinguish what is truly coming from spirit and what is only imagination—it is as if the spirit relies on our capacity to enter a child-like state of absorption and imagination, to speak through us. And in this, as a Spiritualist teacher told me, sometimes means “making it up until it becomes real;” activating an imaginative receptivity so as to allow images to enter and to evolve, while suspending one’s anxiety over the “source” of these images. For example, you can “actively insert a transitional symbol” as you open yourself to the spirits and try to understand something about the changes in that persons life: using a path, a bridge or a rose and “see what happens,” as the image “develops” within you—where is the path going? Who is crossing the bridge? Is the rose blossoming or shriveling? “You must begin with the image even if you make it up!” In thus staying with the image it develops, animates and grows into meaning. Mediums love the right brain left brain analogy—we must bypass our left brain thinking (the analytic side), they say, to
let ourselves be in our right brain, the “place of pretend make-believe and imagination,” in communicating with Spirit. “It will always feel like you are making it up,” but you have to “trust that everything is true, everything is real,” through trusting you will “get what you give.” We are in Nietzsche’s territory here, and all is metaphor, where to fabulate an image into being is enter into the space beyond truth and falsity, insofar as the image becomes true through the efforts of imagining. Only in opening the space of imagination can something become, or rather, enter into collusion with, a reality within the image, something real and living within the phantasm.

In many of the courses in mediumship I attended, we were taught to create an “intension”—to demarcate the space of mediumship as the space in which I will intentionally communicate with the spirits here and now. This can be as simple as understanding that whatever “comes in” in the moment one enters into this demarcated space of practice, whatever sensations or images arrive, are not to be dismissed or ignored. Whatever happens in the moment of “opening the intention” is thus considered to be significant—a part of what the spirit wishes to communicate. There are no accidents, every gesture, word and sound, every bodily sensation, within that designated time and space counts, and requires the attention of the medium—how significant any of these sensory cues are, however, falls upon the medium to discern and intuit. For example, having “set my intension,” I may find that I must cough repeatedly—instead of dismissing this as a simple cough, I will know that in the space of communion, it could be that the spirit communicating died of a lung disease, or emphysema, etc. The language through which the spirits communicate is the language of bodily sensations and of fugitive unconscious images that rise to the surface in a moment. What Medium’s call “information,” the evidential facts of how someone died, how old they were, some intimate details etc., are forms of knowledge communicated in a paradoxical passive-state-of-attention. But the condition of this knowing is
“trust”—you must “trust what comes,” in the form of these fleeting sensory cues, giving them the appropriate attention.

Much of mediumistic training involves ways of receiving information—and the techniques one must learn to bypass conscious thought, which always disrupts the “flow” of images and sensations one needs to receive from the spirits. A controlled automaticity is thus the desired state; and this control also implies a certain arrangement with the spirits, requesting, for example, that the spirits give one a certain kinds of verifiable information—such as names. Setting an intension thus involves laying out a space of attention for spirit communication, but also, focusing on a specific kind of “code” of communication. Perhaps giving the difficulties of “discerning” spirits, the first step in this code-formation is to make of the body an intentional “space” for images and other sensations to appear. The Medium must learn to experiences her body, in this circumscribed space of mediumship, as a “container” for such appearances.

Locating images within a “place” to contain them, itself belongs to the ancient art of mnemonics, wherein one conceives an inner architecture, constructing a topological (topoi) memory map linking “places and images” (Yates 1966, 2). Constructing an “artificial memory” a second-space wherein memories—as image-sensations—are stored, enables these images to later be recalled when needed: “in order to form a series of places in memory” the orator remembers a building, “as spacious and varied a one as possible, the forecourt, the living room, the bedrooms, and parlors, not omitting statues and other ornaments with which the rooms are decorated” (Yates 1966, 3). What an image in itself: the “ancient orator” travels through the dark spaces of the imagination in search of his “memory building,” all whilst standing before an audience, “making his speech” urgently, “drawing form the memorized places the image he has placed in them” (Yates 1966, 2).
That memory could be augmented by constructing an inner second-space within the mind is not unlike what the medium does in treating her body as a container to “make space” for the image-sensations of the spirits. Distinctions between imagination, memory and recollection are important, I want to say, given the way the medium constructs a second-body, or “space” within the body to make room for the emergence of images, just as the art of mnemonics is the construction of a second-space in which to store images so that they may be recalled. Both, the reconstruction of an artificial memory and the reconstruction of the body, as space or container of sense experience, are closely related to repetition. To re-experience the spirits, one must not only “recall” them, but re-presence them. They are living entities—not sequestered to a past but inhabiting the presence.

3.4. Techniques of the [Mediums’] Body

Holding Your Space

We can experience, touch it and feel it, but we cannot hold on to it. Mediumship is the power to hold onto it.

—Professional Medium and Instructor, Arthur Findlay College

You must learn to “hold your Space,” we were told again and again, in one of the many courses in mediumship I attended in New York and New Jersey.

The medium must learn, above all, to hold her space—our teachers tell us. This space, is the space of confidence, of trust in “what comes”: in what one feels, sees and hears from the spirit world. Yet to hold your space for “what comes,” one must make room in the body, to

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39 I take this term from Marcel Mauss’ famous essay (further discussed in Part IV), “Techniques of the Body” (Mauss 1973).
experience the body itself as a space—a quasi-house capable of holding the haptic phantasms, the many condensations that precipitate into a plasticity of *Shapes—or as Spiritualists call them, spirit bodies or ‘intelligences.’* You must relax your mind while honing your senses to those fugitive and overlooked images that enter into this *space of the body.*

It is not enough to see an image within the minds eye—one must feel it—enter into it … and the image will begin to develop, to animate, taking on a life of its own. In this “quickening,” there is a collapse of distance. A static image, seen, as if from afar suddenly becomes proximate, an image you can ‘step into.’ Like ‘films,’ but closer somehow, to witness “spirits” is to enter into affective zones – sensuous atmospheres irreducible simply to “my experience,” yet arising within me. To make oneself a medium of the spirits, is to enter a state of active passivity, involving a subtle ‘reaching forth’ of the sensuous body…the body extends itself, feeling itself as a space, so as to make room for the spirit bodies to enter.

Beholding this inner imagistic space, requires, paradoxically, a moment of alienation – of viewing the body, as if from the outside, as object or container. A medium in class put it this way: “It is as if one part of you is present while the other is absent—a splitting, a disassociation. And then you feel you’ve entered another space, you are now in two spaces at once—in the room, you sit, eyes open, in control, talking to the person in front of you… yet you are saying what you see in that other space…”

It is from this other space, from a vantage beyond life, the vantage of death within life, that the spirits speak… this is the space you must hold, and, holding it is difficult. Like the shyness of dreams, spirit images evaporate the moment the light of conscious thought enters in. In this way the body makes ‘contact’ with the spirit world, which is always there anyway. THEY don’t leave us, my teachers will insist again and again, it is we who leave or forget them.
In her diaries Virginia Woolf describes an analogous experience: “I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation, I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture.” What is this experience of the body as container? A dark box through which, like a pinhole camera, light need only enter, to create an inverted-image of the world on its insides? Acting as both subject and object, the body doubles itself—objectifying itself as “container” of sensations, as if from without. What does it mean to conceive of the body as amplifying a second-space, in which images and their attached sensations condense, forming cloud-like theaters within us?

**Trusting what Comes**

There, the medium sits in her armchair and there is the chair opposite the medium, awaiting the sitter. Placing the armchair in the corner of the room helps the medium build up the energy she needs to give messages from the dead to the living. Spiritual energy is something that is built up, like smoke filling a room. Once there, it begins to dissipate. *Mediumship is not passive. Do not relax. Your energy is engaged even while your conscious mind is relaxed. As we build the energy we hold the energy.* The spirits use our energy, the energy we mediate and hold, to make themselves known, to communicate, to step into our vibration. *Breathe in the energy of earth and heaven... when they merge, the veil*” between this world and the spirit world *is lifted.* You are building a bridge—strengthen the bridge. Hold it, expand it, and communicate through it.

The spirits are intelligences. They respond to requests.
To build up energy the Medium must “sit in the power” of the spirit world. Sitting in the power is not like meditation in the sense of emptying oneself out of images and thoughts—it is rather a reaching forth of the sensory body, the etheric body and inviting in images. The posture of the body looks the same in both cases. We sit in a chair, upright and with our hands placed flat on our laps, or sometimes palms facing upward to invite the energy in. You close your eyes so as to better feel the power of the spirit world blending with your own power. You let your mind float and flow and move through images, you allow your body to reach forth, to become sensitive to all manner of touches. In flowing you avoid staying in conscious thought. Conscious thought, or left brain thought, as Mediums often call it, refers to reflexive thinking, and analysis, moving into conscious of thought means moving out of the unconscious movement of images—the flow—unfolding within you. Better put, you are consciously unconscious, aware of being in two spaces at once. It is almost a state of hyper-consciousness that makes room for unconscious images to rise up within you.

Before giving a message to a sitter, or a demonstration before a public, make an appointment with the spirits and they will honor the appointment. You should practice at the appropriate time every day. In this way, you create a time and space for the spirits to show up. And they will show up.

The mantra of mediumship is trust what comes. When someone is sitting before you, you must trust that what comes to you by way of these ephemeral affects and sensations, a series of impressions, are for the person seated before you, and tell you something about who they are and who they have in the spirit world. In this demarcated time and place, this space, what shows up in you, is for someone else. You must trust these impressions, do not stop and question them, do not analyze them, do not become aware of yourself reaching for them, do not interrupt the flow.
of images. If you are consciously thinking you are limiting the influence of the *power*, inhibiting the flow. Trust what comes and speak what comes, let it flow through you. The spirits are intelligent. Trust that “what you get, will be what the sitter needs.” The spirits excite: we become alert, seeking and sensing, *power* comes into being. When you feel the spirits there is a sensation of *quickening*, an excitation. You must trust in this spiritual power, trust in its essence and believe that *the gaps in communication* will be filled in. What are the gaps? The gaps are the gaps between yourself and the spirit, where you end and the spirit begins… the spirit will fill in this gap, will communicate through you. If you are standing there, before an audience or before a sitter, begin to speak, let the words flow out of you. You say, “I see a woman…” then, just wait for spirit to fill in the gap of information. This is one way of entering the flow, *allowing yourself to put the flow of speech first*, for it is through the flow that information (from the spirits) comes. It is as if speaking itself creates the story that the spirits want you to tell.

In any mediumistic *reading* there are no guarantees only that you will unfold things *inspirationally*. You do not know who will come through, which loved one now in spirit. That is why it is difficult to give the sitter what they want, when they request to talk to talk to so and so in spirit. We have to trust what comes to us, and that what comes to us will be what the person needs at this moment and time.

**How to Give a Reading**

All “readings” are private. They are “experiential” and “confidential.” You are like a therapist, except here, instead of a dyadic relationship between doctor and patient, it is a triadic relationship between medium, spirit and sitter. Also, it is an inversion, in a sense, of the talking
cure. For here the sitter is silent, while the Medium alone speaks. This is the ideal anyway, for if the sitter begins to speak they will inevitably draw you out of your flow, and interrupt your communication with the spirit. You will then risk moving back into a conscious state, where you are thinking about what to say, rather than receiving it. Here, there is a distinction between active thought/consciousness, and passive reception – or rather a passive activity of receiving and then translating what you have received.

*To raise the energy in the room, close your eyes with the expectation that someone will be there. And they will come.* Trust this.

When you begin a reading, having built up the energy needed, you are at your highest point of energy. Once the energy is built, you do not have to rebuild between readings. As you speak it begins to dissipate. This is why Mediums must learn to *hold their energy*, which is like holding a space inside you for something other to appear. *Do not take on too many readings in a row.* You will give poor readings. Build up the energy and pace yourself. *Don’t do more than three readings in a row.* Always limit the time of a reading. *You should not exceed an hour, but half an hour is best.* Use a timer to measure the length of a session—that way you don’t take yourself out of the flow by worrying about the time.

You are part of a team that works with you, a collective consciousness. This involves cooperation with the spirits. Don’t wait for information to hit you in the head, go searching for it. When I give myself over to the spirits, Janet says, wearing her signature purple, I am this—and holds up a cell phone—*I’m wireless, the little computer in the middle and what matters is getting the right signal the right vibration.* My mind watches my language: *How can I say this? How can I get this across to the person in front of me?* Don’t make assumptions about the person sitting before you. Let the spirit world be a corrective to your assumptions and your psychic/intuitive
reading. Going searching for information means holding the expectation that it to appear. One Medium advises us to visualize ourselves in a special place. As we are standing there, suddenly lightning flashes and something (an object etc.) or someone (a spirit) appears behind us. Who is it? With every flash something or someone appears.

When you speak to the sitter, use strong positive statements: “is that correct”? You only want Yes or No answers, otherwise the person begins to “feed the Medium,” with information and tells you too much about themselves. This interrupts what is coming from spirit, which gets mixed with the biographical details you are being told. Remember, the reading is a process of unfolding. It is dynamic. It involves energy. The energy you bring to it is the energy they bring. In this way it seems the spirit world mimics us, they respond to what we bring, or put out into the world.

You must be able to distinguish if the name is someone living or in the spirit world. They should feel different when it is someone in the spirit world. Your attention is not on the person in front of you but on the spirit world. It helps not to look directly at them while you are giving a reading—look just above their heads.

In this way, the triadic relation seems to suspends the dyad. You are not attending to the person in front of you, directly, anyway. The relation between subjects is suspended, as you attend to your bodily sensations as an object of your attention—and these sensations come from the spirit world. Focusing beyond the person in front of you, there is an ethical suspension of judgment at work, at the level of suspending one’s conscious reading of the person, one’s impressions.

As you sit down to give a reading, ask the spirit if they are a man or woman, old, young, how they died etc. Many mediums are taught to ask for these distinctions in a particular way.
For example, if it is a woman, I want to feel it on my left side, if it is a man, on the right, and so on. The spirits will comply with such requests. Asking them these questions structures the conversation, and it means they will answer you in the same way—this is partly what is meant by creating a code with the spirits. It is about establishing patterns whereby your link to the spirit world can be understood through images and symbols that repeat in you—these patterns are a highly personal language built “for you” in tandem with the spirit. The spirits always speak in a manner that is recognizable to you, specifically, because you are their medium. Your mediumship is your experience. And because experience in the everyday sense establishes itself through patterns, habits and repetition, the spirits will work with your patterns. But here is a catch in this establishing of codes. For it also happens that you, as a Medium, will not grow to receive fuller, better and more detailed “information,” if you always expect and rely upon the same, now static, symbols and meanings. At an advanced level, you will be taught to break with your own patterns and expectations, which can only occur by knowing your patterns (the coded way you in particular “receive” information from the spirits). In this way, you open yourself to communication that may initially be unrecognizable—uncoded information—at the limits of your understanding. But this new way of getting information too will become recognizable, can be learned by the Medium, like learning a new language. They will always draw on all that you are, all that composes your experience, even what is unconscious within your experience, to communicate with you.

If you want specific information—how someone died, at what age etc. you need to find a way to ask it. By asking for information in different ways, you open onto new forms of communication. You might create a visual timeline in your mind… you might scan your own body for places of pain or visual cues, to see how they died. For their pain can be located on your
body. As you begin, when you first get a touch a sensation of presence, ask them to draw closer, to feel how they died. Put on their coat, walk in their shoes. Tell them, like a conversation taking place inside of you, to show you pictures… what was the spirit dressed like? When you begin to see, and to feel, you must translate these sensations into words. Paint the spirit back to life for the sitter.

The torso area is the place of feeling, the solar plexus. Feel the energy there. As you see images, hold onto them, enter into them. Even if you see the picture in front of you, in your mind’s eye, it is from here, your gut, that you feel the energy of the image and intuit its meaning. The mind’s perception is limited—it can only show you an image. But the medium enters into the image, and entering in, it becomes a moving-image, unfolding within you like a film. All images that come to you in the space of mediumship, are like that—haptic images—if you take the time to enter into them. An image is like a small world. Maybe it is not your torso where you feel things most acutely – after all, there are other places to receive the “touches” of the spirit world. Find the place in your body, your etheric body, most open to impressions. This is the second-body, the body of sensation through which you extend yourself, opening, toward the spirits. You expand yourself into the spirit. Breathe in, Breathe out. It is an expansion of the self. There is a part of ourselves identical to ourselves that we are not aware of. The feeling of the other is what we try to put into words. Our sensations as mediums are not our own. They are of the other in me. We must separate our own feelings from the feelings we feel of others, feelings that are nevertheless in us.

Still, our experience is always in our mediumship. That is why it is easier to “link” in to spirits, living or dead, with whom you have a common resonation, with whom you share
similarity. Some refer to this as the law of attraction, like attracting like. That is why you will get some information repeatedly, because the information or the feeling behind it resonates with you.

**Discernment**

In a reading you must *go into images, but also behind the image*, to try and find out who the *spirit communicator* is that is projecting the image to you. Like trying to get behind your own dream. For the only ground of *discernment*, truly, is the spirit itself… the images cannot tell you if they are drawn from life or death, from a memory or a spirit… You need a third term, a spirit, to ground the distinction between the mundane and the spiritual. The practice of discernment, in this sense, is a distinction between false and true images.

When you get a photographic “flash” of an image in your minds-eye, how do you know when these are memories of the person sitting before you? How do you know when they are images of the spirit’s life?

False images would be those of the imagination, or those that you are picking up from the “aura” of the person sitting before you. That makes them false only insofar as they are not communications directly from the “spirits,” but part of your psychic intuition. Psychic work requires that you read the person sitting before you. You enter their aura. You feel their colors. You identify their personality, where they are in this moment in their lives, you intuit what it going on in their life. You enter their unconscious memories. The images in psychic work do not come from a spirit communicator. When you do psychic work you are inevitably picking up *someone else’s dream*, their memoires, their desires. You are *reading* their perceptions and then giving these back them in your own words. I asked someone in my class what the point would be then, if we are really only giving people’s perceptions back to them, mirroring their unconscious dreams back to them, so to speak. *But that is the difference of mediumship*, he said, in
mediumship you are not just doing psychic work, not just mirroring back people’s perceptions, but getting your “facts” from the spirits directly.

But in practice, I have found, it is very hard to distinguish between the two—between what comes from the “aura” of the living and what comes from the spirit world, and Mediums make this mistake constantly. There are all kinds of tricks to help you discern the spirits. Some try to make this distinction spatially. Where does the feeling come from? Behind you or in front of you? In mediumship, many say the focus is behind you, in images that rise up in a fog as if behind you, where it is said the blending takes place, while in psychic work, the focus remains in front of you, where you pick up the energy of the other person. In my experience, this has to do with the distinction between being the distant observer of an image, and stepping into the image, feeling the image as if you’ve stepped into a cloud.

It is the most difficult thing about mediumship as far as I can tell, being able to discern the sensory images that come, to allocate them “the proper agency.” This too, is the aim of iconoclasm, according to Webb Keane, to allocate the proper agency to humans, gods and things: “getting people to see what beings in the world are actually agents (God and humans, not spirits or fetishes) and what kinds of agency properly belong to them” (Keane, 54). The measure of a good medium, it seems, is their ability to discern between two sources of images and sensation, consistently—between those coming from the imagination alone, and those from spirit, those picked up psychically, and those mediumistically. For, as I have said, there is also the sense that one kind of image can turn into another. You might be conjuring an image from memory or imagination, but in staying with that image for a moment, another power steps in and takes over—and you are now communicating a spirit given image. In this way, imaginary images are
transformed into spirit communications, as fabulation becomes truth, (or shows itself to have always been truth). The work of discerning spirits, and thus of discerning between images and sensations from the spirits, is a strange kind of process whereby the spirit itself is constructed as a visible, and recognizable figure in the here-and-now.

A Message for Blanka

The first two days of our four-day advanced course in Mediumship at a Church in New Jersey, I was exhausted. Every night I would go directly to bed after writing up some field notes after dinner. It became increasingly difficult over the years spent becoming a Medium by taking courses in the techniques of mediumship, to communicate with my own world, friends or family, while conducting fieldwork. I felt myself in an alternate reality, and in fact, I was. It was difficult playing the anthropologist and the Medium at the same time. Not only does mediumship require you to split yourself in two—to place your attention in two spaces at once, the foggy spirit world and the actual world, but anthropology itself requires that you play both the observer, consciously taking notes in your mind, and the participant. Moving between the daydreamy states of mediumship into the kind of attention required of the anthropologist, made this doubly difficult, not least because the Medium uses techniques to bring herself into an altered state, a condition-seconde, to use Freud’s term. Some days, after spending all day in classes and in conversion with my Medium friends, it was as if I was stuck in the fog in which everything was at once acutely present yet absent – and when I would try to recall the events of the day, I felt an amnesiac.
The third day began as usual. We met at the Church, early, coffee in hand, and would sit excitedly with our notebooks ready in one of the rows of chairs facing the podium at the front of the Church. There were figurines of angels all around, and vases with sateen flowers. The Church was decorated in pastel hues of pinks, purples (the color of spirit!) and whites. On the small stage, a step up from the floor, sat two gold-gilded armchairs, empty, awaiting their Mediums. It is in those chairs that the Medium’s who have come to “demonstrate” before the congregants will sit until they take flight, pacing around the stage while they give a message to some unsuspecting but eager onlooker.

We had been listening to our two teachers, visiting from their Church and Spiritualist “retreat” center in Canada, lecture a little, as they did every morning, on topics ranging from the history of Spiritualism, to esoteric philosophies, to the techniques of Mediumship. Everyone seemed very much in awe of them and accorded them a great deal of respect. Afterward we would break into groups and practice our mediumship through different kinds of exercises. During the exercises in psychometry, we sat in a circle and a tray was passed around with an object on it. It was someone’s wristwatch. We were to read the psychic energy of the watch, to intuit where it came from, whom it belonged to, any memories connected with the object.

Sometimes we would practice giving public demonstrations before the class, having the other Medium’s play our audience. Or, as was most often the case, we would break into groups of two to read one another, that is, give a message from spirit, or conduct a psychic reading by entering the person’s aura, using different techniques. Over those first two days I felt I couldn’t get close enough to the images. It was as if I was seeing things only at a distance, in my minds eye—like films. But I wasn’t entering into the images. I wasn’t able to bring the images closer—and this in part because I kept doubting the nature of the images, feeling that I was forcing them, that I was
bringing them into being through my imagination. The next night something shifted. A feeling
began to grow in me – the only way to describe it as a feeling of love. As we “sat in the power,”
I remember saying a prayer, a prayer that I might trust, that I might love, that I might better
“serve the spirits.” We then moved into our exercises. That morning, we broke into groups of
two – ‘find a partner’ they said. I turn to Blanka, a mysterious dark haired women from
somewhere in eastern Europe with a deep earthy smokers voice…there is something intriguing
about her, and a little intimidating. She seems powerful and hidden somehow. As usual, we
know little about one another, leaving biography mostly aside. That morning our teacher had
impressed upon us the importance of acknowledging your mediumship, to claim it, and thereby
to acknowledge it ‘to the spirits’—that is, to say to realize you are “serving spirit.” He had said
that as Medium’s we are trained to be between two worlds. Realize that they need to be
recognized, that you are creating a conduit for healing. The spirit influences you when a true
need is present in the person before you. You must see the sitter. “I see you” I acknowledge you.
So you see the sitter and the spirit world at the same time, you are between two worlds. There is
an old Spiritualist saying, he tells us: “I see you, I hear you, I know you.”

As we sat opposite one another, we were to remind ourselves that we are to be in two
spaces at once. You are the observer of your body, observe your body and all that it senses... you
are not a judge but an observer... Now moving from the observer of yourself... you are filling
the room with your awareness. In this way, you treat yourself as an object you can behold. That
is mediumship—your body is your instrument through which you bridge two worlds, two spaces,
holding them before you at the same time. With one part of yourself you enter the auric field of
the person before you. This is the dyadic movement. You then raise yourself up to the spirit
vibration. This is the triadic moment. It is a movement forward and up. And here you must hold
the space, hold the space that has opened with in you as a space where the spirits will appear—and
this is the mysterious meaning of “holding your space.” Many people achieve this through
visualizing an actual place that the enter – like a garden – and walking through that garden they
move from “making it up,” to being presented with images that they feel are not of their own
making.

With one part of yourself you remain seated in this room, and you are speaking to the
person sitting in front of you. With another part you are absent, you are seeing and sensing the
spirit world. You are both absent and present at the same time. The sensation of the spirits is
often described as a feeling of quickening. That is what we were taught, to expect a sensation of
quickening the mark discerning spirit presence from imagination. They come when you ask
them, we are told, they come when you open your heart, when you feel love and when you
sincerely want to serve them… and then they always show up. Always.

Blanka and Lara and I sat in a circle of three. Our chairs turned to one another. We sat
close but without touching. At first we all closed our eyes, breathing silently. We agreed that
whoever got a ‘spirit contact’ first would be the first to go – that is, to give a reading. Lara began
to speak, “Blanka I feel I’m with you… I’m seeing a cake a celebration… it is a wedding cake.
And I’m feeling he is absent… yes, he is not there. He is not older, he looks more like he is in his
30’s or 40’s. There is a ring, something about the ring is strange… the ring is missing! Blanka
looks at her without recognizing then she stops and says, “you know Lara that is funny because
before I came here I was being told a story about a man whose engagement was ruined because
his sister interfered—she somehow took the ring (a family heirloom)… as Blanka trails further
into this story… Lorna starts to laugh remembering a time when she too was at a wedding and
the groom didn’t show. It was gently decided that Lorna in this instant, didn’t have a ‘spirit
contact,’ for the information she gave would be considered psychic in nature—a reading of the ‘aura’ of the person in front of her, which would have included Blanka’s memories. After we laughed about these stories, I began. I told Blanka, in the typical way one is taught to select a person: “I feel I am with you.” There it was suddenly, a quickening in me – a kind of heightened feeling like excitement, unlike the day before where the images seemed distant and flat. As I spoke I didn’t feel like a spectator to what was happening. Here it was as if I could feel the images rising up in me without effort—it is a kind of passive activity – a state in which you feel the sensations welling up within you, which are somehow living and forming at their own volition, unlike in imaginative exercises where you actively conjure images. This feels as if you are letting go, in a kind of surrender, and at the same time you are hyper-aware of what ‘they’ are showing you…your attention is rapt. But if feels also like you are on a tight-rope, like you have to maintain, above all, a balance, like an instrument tuned just right—not too tight, not too loose. Too much thought or anticipation and you manipulate the images—you lose the surrender—too much surrender and you cannot actively attend to the image and draw it out. If you doubt, even for a moment, the images you are receiving, you begin to move into conscious thought, and the whole thing falls down like a house of cards. When the images begin to flow, there is a drawing out that takes place. I was taught, in these instances to speak to the spirit—to ask them to show me more, to show me their relation to the sitter, to show me the ‘end of their life’, to show me memories—anything that could become “evidence.” And indeed it felt as if, everytime I asked to be shown something, I was shown something, as long as I trusted that it would happen.

In this moment, I asked them to show up. I then imagined (actively) that I was walking by a pond and there was a forest surrounding the pond. I saw a forest all around with low hovering mists and I walked through the trees, through the trees there is a clearing and I know
that in this clearing ‘they’ will show up. I also imagine they are there in the mists, waiting to come forward. Then I relax and stop imagining—I stop actively generating this scene and wait. I felt in this moment of waiting that I had suddenly reached out my hand. I then felt someone take it—a hand in mine. I saw a red stone on the hand… and as I looked closer at the hand I saw the aging skin, the brown spots. I began to speak to Blanka in the manner we were taught. “I have someone here in spirit, I feel she is an older women, I can see her hand… she is wearing a ring with a red stone.” Blanka is looking at me and nods to verify… I go on. I don’t want to stop talking, or to attend to her directly, for fear of being taking out of the ‘flow’ and back into ‘mind’ or ‘thought,’ as they tell us to avoid. This actually works—as I continue to speak, even haltingly, new images begin to form. I see a small wooden house with a bench in the front. I see the old woman now, sitting on the bench wearing a black shall—I’m embarrassed by this detail because it seems like an old woman from a fairy tale—but I go on, despite myself. I feel—this is a bodily sensation—the woman draw the little girl close. I feel her put her arm around her, as if her arm were around me. I immediately feel the little girl is Blanka and this was her grandmother. “I see her sitting on a bench, she is your Grandmother. She puts her arms around you—you are very close. You are close also because you are alike… there is something spiritual, but also something mysterious about this woman… she is wise, she knows things and you are drawn to her for this, because you feel you are the same and also because you want her to teach you.” I begin to see that the Grandmother is using her hands as she sits there… it looks as if she is wrapping yarn, but then I feel it is something else… like she is holding rosary beads and muttering words… she child watches fascinated. “I see her holding something, it looks like yarn… no beads, maybe rosary beads… I feel it is something spiritual she is doing, like reciting prayers.” Blanka is saying ‘yes’—and she begins to well up in tears, a kind of bodily index, and
an affective verification in its own right. I have often heard Mediums almost giddy when re-telling how their words drew tears from the sitter, revealing both the weird intimacy in distance between medium and sitter, and the eagerness for verification, sometimes almost competitively, on the part of the Medium. I go on. “I know this sounds strange but she keeps showing me a fire place… and she stands in front of the fire place and keeps putting her hands in the fire, the pulling them out, putting them in and pulling them out.’ I ask her, the spirit of the old woman, as we were taught to do, what this means, I tell her I don’t understand. In my minds eye I see a repetitive gesture—she holds her hands over the flame and pulls them out, and repeats this again and again. Then, I begin to hear words and I give the following “message” to Blanka. “I feel it is a message for you Blanka…” I hear the words, “don’t be afraid to put your hands in the fire, they won’t get burned.” And Blanka says, “oh God—yes. I know exactly what this means Erin. Thank you so much… that is her, that is her!” She begins to well up with tears and looks again into my eyes very seriously and says “thank you, thank you.”

In this particular experience and in many of the readings I had given in previous classes over the years, there was sometimes a sensible shift that took place. There are only vague words and phrases to describe this this—“a heightened feeling” a “quickening” as many describe it, but the “energy changes,” as many a medium has described. For me, it often felt as if the images that would pass through me during a reading, were at a distance…I also felt less captured by them. There is something very unsatisfying in this feeling, because you feel full of doubt about what you are seeing and saying. Other times, however, the shift will take place, as happened when I saw the old woman. I felt as if I had fully entered the image and that I was not driving the images, as much as they were driving me. Or rather, that I was both pushing the image to unfold, and that it was somehow also pushing back, taking me further into it. I felt I was being shown
something, led along, but also the images felt tangibly closer in the sense that I could feel them on multiple levels at once. I could not only see, but also feel the emotions connected to them, as if I could feel into their meaning. This impressed upon me the cultivated structure of spirit experience—in that in following the exercises we were taught, including the trick of visualizing a place where the spirits will meet you—it was possible to bring about this “quickening” sense of connection. And in those instances where one felt the quickening, the images were not only more affecting to myself and the sitter—and thus felt more “true”—but seemed possessed by their own animacy.

When Blanka later gave me a message, she sat opposite me and began. “I feel I am with a lady, she is older, I feel she is your grandmother. She is very warm, very kind—and likes to talk! Yes she is talkative, and smart. She has something to say and spends a lot of time reading. I feel she herself was very religious—but in a more spiritual way—that is, she felt the connection to God.” I nod to all of this. It sounds like how I would have described my father’s mother. She goes on, “Um…uh…” suddenly she grabs her throat—“ugh. I feel like I can’t swallow… I’m having trouble swallowing.” Her face changes and she looks anguished. She throws her had back as if in pain, “Oh its terrible… I can’t swallow and I have this terrible taste in my mouth… I can’t keep anything down…She couldn’t eat anything without throwing it up! She is in so much pain!” She pauses gain, again throwing herself back and grapping her throat then her stomach—“it is a cancer, a cancer in the stomach.” I nod—feeling increasingly upset by the drama of her physical performance of the pain. My grandmother died a terrible slow death of cancer to the stomach and then the breasts. She was a steady, full woman, who shriveled down to almost skeletal proportions without much in the way of medical intervention to soothe the pain. Seeing her that way as a child affected me deeply. “Yes, it is cancer of the stomach…and she
sees everyone around her, trying to take care of her, but there just isn’t much they can do—and this is a big change because she wouldn’t let people fuss over her, she was always taking care of everyone…she was always the one…” She keeps communicating the agony through her gestures. She tells me, “no one should have to suffer like that.” I too began to cry. It was terrible, this performance of her pain. And only yesterday I had been thinking of my grandmother’s death. It was the first time I had said goodbye to someone I loved. And here is that same mysterious synchronicity when inner thoughts and memories are suddenly externalized—expressed in the sensations and words of another person. Even given the recognizability of it all, the familiarity, hearing it come to you from someone outside of yourself, makes it somehow new, as shot through by an irreducible exteriority—one that retells the same story but with a difference that affects you all over again.

A Demonstration at Arthur Findlay College, Stansted

There were many moments in my becoming medium days in which strange things were felt and sometimes seen. But one event, in particular, changed the way I felt about mediumship. Up until that point, it had mostly seemed to me like intuitive images that leapt into the mind, albeit images that could be unfolded and felt, images that would enter the bodily sensorium further, if you gave them the right kind of attention. And then there was the repeated surprise, and it was always a surprise, that the images you relate to the stranger sitting in front of you somehow resonate with them—sometimes deeply, that is, drawing out the contours of someone they loved and lost. However surprising and strangely energizing giving readings and receiving readings from other Mediums was, this was inseparable from the all too mundane, too natural feeling of
receiving images. It mostly did not feel like some otherworldly state, but like a foggy daydream, and I was used to daydreaming. I can still hear my grade school teacher telling me: *get my head out of the clouds!*

There was an event in the course of my mediumistic training that changed things. Changed the way I felt about what I was doing, and the division between anthropologist and medium became definitively blurred. Anthropology is very aware of the fact that the distance we assume, inhabiting a specific role in writing about things ethnographically, is always, to a degree *fabulated*. The distance is real, we are outsiders to whatever inside we study, and yet, the not so secret secret is, we are also always in what we describe, not least because of the very mediacy of immediacy that names “experience.” These distinctions are put in a new kind of relief, especially as they become less perceptible, as in doing fieldwork “at home,” as I was in North America, often amongst Mediums in New York City where I lived. As Favret-Saada said of studying Witchcraft in France’s hinterlands, and as Courtney Bender applies to her own ethnography among similarly spiritual practitioners in Cambridge, Massachusetts, “you find yourself in an system without an outside.” You are, here, especially as an “academic” type, a researcher, a social scientist, already playing a role that the community has designated for you—and Spiritualists, by making themselves “explainers” of experience, have already internalized that role. In any case, the practice of mediumship, by its very nature, further tensed these distinction—studying to become a Medium, undergoing the kind of training Mediums go through to hone their gifts, requires turning oneself inside-out, giving oneself over to the practices, following one’s inner images to see where they take you. Like the analysand on the couch, an analogy Levi-Strauss famously made, and this often times provided an uncanny parallel during my fieldwork (Levi-Strauss 1963). Mediumship concerns, after all, the movement
between inside and outside, as much as the movement through different spaces at once. Levi-Strauss said of the shaman, that he makes of the patient’s body a landscape, reading her insides from her outsides, inserting, through words sung over the body, the presence of spirit helpers that travel through the blockages between organs to effect a cure. While the analyst, likewise reads the outside to address the inside, but by listening to the “talk” of the patient, for the spaces between words, between conscious and unconscious utterances, in order to find the inner blockages that such utterances reveal.

I include this story, describing my own experience in training as a medium, firstly because it is very hard to describe what goes on within the Medium, unless it is from one’s own experience—for while Medium’s often talk about how they receive information, by their very techniques they create an inner space within the body, as I’ve tried to show, where such experience unfolds. One must enter into that space to fully understand it. Second, it is to reveal how, by the mediation of my “training” in mediumship, and the techniques of the body we learned, to use Mauss’ term, shaped and conditioned my having such an “experience” in the first place—that there was an “art” not only to mediumship, but to having spirit “experiences” as such.

That morning I had been to the pond on the grounds of Arthur Findlay College, outside of London. The grounds of the college were picturesque to say the least, fields with large old trees, and nearby there was the pond, surrounded by woods. I would enter through the small wooden gate, and walk around the pond when I was alone, as a way of clearing my head between classes. During the week we were divided into two groups, those who were studying “evidential mediumship,” like myself, and those who were studying “trance,” which involves channeling spirits through the body who then speak through the medium, while the medium remains in an semi-unconscious state. We had been giving readings to one another, initially using props, such
as colored cards and then advancing to more difficult readings. Someone would choose a card from a deck of cards with different combinations of colors on them—you were instructed to choose whatever card you felt drawn to. The person acting as Medium would then try to read something about you, through the card you chose. This was a form of psychic reading that enabled you to enter the person’s “aura.” There was a lot of talk about auras, and the spectrum of colors composing auras. It was a re-education in color, at least insofar as we were to feel our way into each color, to find the meaning of the color for us, a meaning always already layered by specific social meanings—red for love, for example. What colors do you see in the person’s auratic field, like a bubble of color, surrounding the body sitting before you? Other times we were given a piece of paper and told to create an aura-graph, a drawing in varying colors, which reflects the persons “aura,” and tells you something about their life, their feelings, possibly even their future. Feeling the subtle distinctions between colors, is one way Mediums are taught to connect affects to symbols more generally. The color read thus becomes meaningful through this accretion of associations, so that when the Medium sees “red” in a reading, she will immediately know what “red” is code for, and thus understand what the spirit is trying to tell her. This again, is the work of establishing associations of meaning, patterns through which the spirits can better communicate through you. The key is to feel your way into the color, such that it becomes aligned to you at the level of sensation.

As the week progressed we began reading without props, as well as practicing demonstration techniques, which meant standing in front of the class of around twenty students, getting a spirit link, a spirit communicator, and then allowing this connection to develop in image and sensation, whilst describing to your audience what you were seeing, hearing and feeling. After a few pieces of information, you would ask the people in the class if they could take this
information, if the bits of biographical, or sometimes shared memories, matched up with someone now dead, that they knew. There is a strict format for how one demonstrates evidence, in both the English and American traditions of Spiritualism, which differ from one another, particularly in how the Medium connects with someone in the audience. The English present a few pieces of information, and then ask if anyone in the audience understands this. From a distance it might have looked like the Medium standing before the group was playing the role of auctioneer. She would say things, “I feel I have a woman here… around 60 years old…” and a person would raise their hand, as if bidding, then another and another. The more information you could give and the more specific the information, the less people raised their hands, until you could figure out “who you were with”—who, in other words, the message from the spirit was addressed to. It is partly process of elimination and partly instinct—that is, at some point even if there are still a few hands in the air, the Medium will commit to a particular person as the recipient of the message and say, I feel I am with you. The American way, as I’ve described in Part 3, involves choosing someone from the audience right away, and trusting that the spirits will guide you to a person for whom they have a message. This is mostly how the Medium’s at Lily Dale work, and many of them have described seeing little white lights above the heads of those for whom the message is intended. M. once said to me, that it was the English who have always used the word demonstrate, and that it doesn’t mean just proving, but showing you can do it. Not so much demonstrating a proof as an embodied showing—a performance of spirit communication. She seemed to think that the focus on evidences was overblown: Everytime they say Evidential Medium—I think what? They don’t know what they are saying… but they keep coming up with this stuff! It’s simple: if you live the Law [of Nature] you will have the Experiences.
Mediumship is in part, making an art of distraction. Or rather, you are working in a space of distraction, dividing your attention between what is in front of you, and the foggy spirit world, so your focus has to be on maintaining the connection to the spirit world. If you lose your connection, you can try to return to the pulse of the image, by repeating the last sentence you got right—that is, was verified by a yes—which takes you back into the feeling of the information you are receiving. If the sitter doesn’t recognize the piece of evidence you are bringing to them, you need to let it go and move on. It doesn’t mean the information is simply wrong—although Medium’s make mistakes! we are reminded—but perhaps it was not communicated correctly, or perhaps they can’t receive it at this time. Sometimes mistakes have to do with the energy of the person you are trying to read for, or in a public demonstration, give a message to. It is often said that some sitters come with “bad energy.” If someone has bad energy, we are told to leave them be—don’t continue trying to give them a message, for you won’t be able to shift their energy and it will kill your energy. A person with bad energy could simply be someone who behaves skeptically, or someone who is generally unreceptive—the straw man often used to describe this is a person who is sitting with arms folded, in a gesture of stubborn disbelief. In any case, it is the job of the Medium to try and find the extra detail, the point of specificity in the otherwise ordinary images that come to you. The difference that makes a difference, this is what constituted evidence.

After a few days of training we had been told to visualize a place where were could meet the spirits. My mind returned to the pond where I had walked during our English “tea” breaks. When I sat across from my partner, I would try and enter that place by the pond in my minds eye. I would see myself at the edge of the pond, waiting alongside the green water, looking into a dense curve of surrounding forest. I would later return to this place again and again in
preparation to give a reading to someone. Sometimes in waiting for the spirits, I would enter that forest and find myself in a clearing by a large rock. Upon that rock someone would suddenly appear and begin speaking to me… as they spoke, I would speak aloud, describing what I saw and felt about the spirit in as much detail as possible. These images would hover between clarity and mist, at moments all but fading away entirely. Sometimes I would see myself reaching into the dark woods, as if to pull someone out. Sometimes someone would take my hand, pull me further into the woods where I could begin to make out the figure. There was a delicate balance in holding these images. If you tried too hard to listen and see, they would disappear. It was only in moving along in the flow of the image, unfurling the images slowly, that they would begin to take on a life of their own, becoming ever more distinct. Sometimes a body would appear piecemeal: first a hand becomes visible… what is the hand doing? The hand is tapping its fingers… there are rings on the hand…or the hand opens up, it is holding an object…what is the hand holding? The animacy of the image grows, and as it grows and is enlivened, it feels less and less like a made up image, and more and more like something coming to you, a kind of visitation.

Marx would perhaps call this very transition from that which is made-up, to it appearing as if it has a life of its own, the birth of fetishism, wherein the once ordinary man-made thing appears to take on an animacy, and thus agency, quite apart from us. If the fetish comes into being in this magical transition from fiction to (at least apparent) fact, from that which is an extension of ourselves, to something endowed with its own life apart from us, at least in the case of mediumship, it is more than a deception of forms (as in Marx’ example, the deception of the commodity form). By what means does a form become animate? In his famous work on the fetish, William Pietz says:

The fetish is, then, first of all, something intensely personal, whose truth is experienced as a substantial movement from “inside” the self (the self as totalized through an
impassioned body, a “body without organs”) into the self-limited morphology of a material object situated in space “outside” itself (Pietz 1985).

To say that the fetish is the belief in the animacy of objects, tells us next to nothing, either about the nature of objects or of belief. But, to describe the fetish as something arising from “something intensely personal,” from a truth experienced as the very movement from inside to outside, means a mysterious intensification has taken place which is travels from the impassioned, affected body to an object in space. Perhaps for this transition to take place, for an intensity “inside” to become an extensive spacialized “outside,” as an object unto itself, one never has to leave the body, itself already a fold of the outside. And Pietz here draws upon Deleuze’s Body Without Organs (BWO), which he borrows from Artaud; for the BWO is the virtual body of intensity and transition (or transversality) immanent within the actual body and its organ-ization. The BWO moves not through organs but through levels of intensity of the affected body, as if it is precisely, as Leiris says, the fact of an “impassioned body” that gives our actual body the capacity to become-other whilst standing still. A body “leaping in place” (Deleuze). The transition we are talking about here, in the context of mediumistic practice, is not unlike the transition whereby something ‘intensely’ felt becomes a spirit—as if the spirit were there in the feeling all along—instead of a spirit within the machine, a spirit within the affect. But I digress.

That afternoon, our teacher selected five of our group who he deemed “ready,” to give a demonstration this time, before entire group and the other instructors. We were told to prepare ourselves because at 7:30 we would be stepping onto the stage and demonstrating our Mediumship. I was nervous to stand before all those people—probably around forty altogether, among them the five or six teachers we had been working with, English and American Mediums.
I went to my room after dinner and began to meditate, but feverishly, actively, more like praying. I asked them to calm me down. I asked them to meet me on that stage at 7:30, as our teacher C. had told us—make an appointment with the spirits—so I did. I closed my eyes, and suddenly I felt my heart beating faster and faster, and I felt as if my whole body were being carried across a field. I could feel the wind moving over me. Then I landed, so to speak, at the pond. There I stood and sun began to break through the clouds, and I felt illuminated by the sun, standing in its warmth. Everything was calm around me, and I was now very calm. I reached into the water, cupping my hands, and I began to drink. A horse appeared, with a white mane, and I gave the horse to drink out of my cupped hands. It was then that I began to see another presence there with me, by the pond. A man with a carefully sculpted moustache, wearing an elegant suit, with slicked back black hair. I was looking down at his feet, and they were moving fast, dancing, I thought. His nice shiny shoes taking leaps and making turns. Then he reached for his partner, an elderly lady, and began spinning her in and out, pulling her toward him. He made me laugh, there was something joyful about him, and he was so full of energy… just kept dancing. I then saw a letter, a handwritten letter. At this point in this waking vision, I remembered C.’s words, warning us not to get too much information before we are in the moment of giving a message—the moment of being up on the stage. He said getting too much information would interrupt the flow of images their automaticity, and we would cease to be working from inspiration and begin working from memory. So as C. had instructed us to do, using his words, I asked the spirit figure to wait for me, to wait and meet me at 7:30: “I see you, and I’m here for you, so please wait for me until 7:30.”

Once in the library where the service was being held, a calm came over me. I didn’t feel at all scared or nervous about performing. I had this strange sense of confidence in my vision,
and I really did trust that it, or who, whatever it was, would return—and I felt a warmth all through me, a love in me, when I thought of the horse and the man I had seen.

There were two men and three woman, including myself, who would be demonstrating. As we entered the old library, the room was dimly lit but opened onto a wall of large windows, through which you could still see the darkening landscape, the manicured fields of the manor house. The room was mahogany, at least that is how I remember it. Dark wood framing everything. It felt like you really were stepping back into the 19th century. At the very front left corner of the room was a deep bay window, and around it a small stage, extending outward in a semi-circle. The stage and the curtains framing the stage were dark burgundy color. To the right of the stage were five chairs lined up for the Mediums to sit. As I entered and walked up to the chairs by the stage, I felt as if I were only half present, like a part of myself was not in the room at all, but somewhere else, somewhere still in that vision-place.

I felt a strong desire throughout the service and the singing—there is always so much singing! Which they say is to raise the energy—to re-enter that other space, the space where I had met the man with the shiny shoes. I wanted to keep that space close, so that the images would be waiting for me when I finally took the stage. “Like holding a balloon on a string.” C. has said, keep the images close so you can return to the experience when it is time. In this way you work from experience, not from memory. But he warned us, if you don’t hold the connection, hold the string, it is almost impossible to return once the link is broken.

Because of the state I was in, I could scarcely pay attention to the other demonstrations—though they all went very well, that is, their messages were received. When it was my turn, I went up to the stage and greeted everyone. We were taught to connect with the audience, to bring energy to our interaction with them. I would have felt awkward normally, but in this situation I
was too much outside of myself to really take in the fact that I was standing before an audience. I began describing the man, and as I entered into the image, first seeing his dancing shoes, then the rest of him, other images started to form. I was speaking in short, clear sentences, as we had been taught: I see, I hear, I feel. “I see a man, he has dark hair and is wearing a black suit. He is very well dressed, has a moustache. I see him dancing. He likes to dance. I see him dancing with a woman, an elderly woman. Can anyone take this?” A few people raised their hands. So I continued and the images continued. “I feel he had trouble breathing. I see a hospital bed. Now, I am hearing a song, it is that Police song, “every breath you take, every move you make I’ll be watching you. I don’t know… I feel this song is for the person he left behind, that he is watching them, just as they watched him take his last breath.” Suddenly there is only one hand still in the air. I turn to her, a fellow Medium, but one who was taking the “trance” course. “It’s for me,” she says in a straightforward way, “that is my father.” “Thank you,” I say to her, as we were taught. The rest what came to me was in flashes – I felt he was a ladies man, and then I saw him writing a letter. We were to enter the image, to feel its meaning. The women in the audience said to me, “that is my father, he died of emphysema, couldn’t breathe. I watched him take his last breath. He loved dancing, was Italian, and especially loved dancing and women.” She laughs. “When he died I was at his bedside in the hospital. There was a letter he had written to me.” She was visibly affected by the message. Verification is never just information, but information that taken up affectively, information that strikes a cord. That is why it is, in the end, less about the “facts” you bring, and about the subtle relays, the chords of resonance struck between your words, the specific way of putting things, and the receivers connecting memories and semi-conscious images. I myself was overwhelmed by this correspondence, or the feeling of correspondence…and moreover, that these strange inner films really did respond in some sense
to my request that they “return” later, when I step onto the platform. The vision had unfolded further, just as C. had said that it would. And the spirits really had showed up, had waited for me, just as I had asked them to.

After the demonstration she thanked me and told me more details about her father. She said she feels he is still with her, still watching her. After that it seemed there was a strange intimacy between us—I felt it too, and she would often come to talk with me throughout the week and when we returned to the Church in New Jersey.

Owing in part to the state of dissociation one enters into in trying to give messages, it is terribly hard to remember anything in that state. And, if it is believed that the authenticity of the trance medium is directly correlated to their forgetfulness, this is also true of all forms of mental mediumship—at least insofar as it is not memory that allows you to see things of the spirit word, but a form of active forgetting. Nietzsche’s insistence health, in the broadest sense, requires forgetting, forgetting history as much as forgetting ourselves to the presence of feeling, and to know the correct measure of forgetting—“on the possession of a powerful instinct for sensing when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically”—lest we “lose ourselves in a stream of becoming” (Nietzsche, 63). Here, in the movement of images through the Medium, it is as if everything comes out in streams—and is heard therefore in streams. What is learned, is the ability to form at least a minimal “horizon,” to return to Nietzsche, for that stream, that flow of surfeit images to not carry us away into the chaos of insanity, and, by these means, rather to harness and intensify them. The horizon is the space the Medium accords in her body, a bounded space, for these images to appear. After she opens herself to them, she forgets them. Still, they say you can never truly turn it off—that they are always there. Here is the distinction drawn in practice between working from memory, and from the flow of affective presences, the “flow” of
sensory images—to speak from the place of the spirit, from the place of inspiration, you must stay in the moment, not remember the past. Even when you are given a message by a medium, the words either fall flat, or resonate—and when they resonate… its as if they were your words all along, echoed back to you. But words and images you didn’t know you had in you, words and images that were not, as yet, conscious to you. In this way they feel both recognizable and unrecognizable. They occupy the limit of memory. Often the messages resonate with how you are feeling at the moment, so they seem to possess an special affective charge.

This practice of giving and receiving messages seems to tap into an almost collective unconscious of images and sensations across bodies, creating a mysterious intimacy between strangers. There is a deep sense of connection, of intimacy arising from these practices of reading one another, despite the fact, or perhaps because, you actually know very little about one another. Your biographies suspended, you don’t know much in the way of their kinship, or where they grew up, or major life events, or anything, but what you do encounter, what builds this intimacy, rather, is a field of fugitive images. When these images are spoken by you, and then “picked up” by the sitter—when they resonate—it is as if you are entering into the space of their unconscious. As if a third space opens up between the two of you, sitting there across from one another: a third space of almost pure presence, of immediate association, of contact between my innermost images, affects and sensations, and those in you. It almost as if you have to forget the other, in order to attune yourself to this shared space of presence, not bounded by history or biography. For the Medium above all feels her images—which means she is an empathetic relation to them, they are in her, as much as they are for the other. In this stranger-intimacy the space between bodies, between my insides and your insides, can feel blurred.
Their path, they say, is never easy. As one teacher put it, the physical world and our relation to it is a difficult path. But it can be the greatest path, bringing people hope. At the closing of the week, the end of our class, he suddenly told us, gently but with some gravity, that within five years of starting down the path of becoming-medium: you will lose at least eighty-percent of those around you, those closest to you. Your mediumship will change you, if you believe it won’t, you are in for a rude awakening! Everything you do in the practice of mediumship makes you more sensitive, which means you have to be careful because your mediumship can make you relive past emotions, past traumas, as much as it can heal these.

I did encounter many stories of trauma. One man I met came to mediumship after he suffered being blown up in Afghanistan while serving in the army. He was mostly unharmed. However, on his return he suffered other loses. First the loss of this mother, then the loss of his unborn child. These were devastating. He began hearing and seeing things, like strange figures in his house. He thought he was losing his mind. He wasn’t sleeping. Eventually he went to a psychic, and began seeing a therapist who herself became convinced of his abilities—itself a strange event of transference. He slowly began to intuit things about those around him, and would share this with his closest friends and relatives who would confirm his intuitions as “true.” This was the opening onto his study of mediumship, and involved inhabiting the crack-up of his world, as he tried to live into these hallucinatory visions and sensation. And this, to the point of separating himself for periods from his ordinary life by staying home for months, seeing very few people, with the exception of those connected to his desire to pursue mediumship. Was it a calling or a sign of sickness? Given the frequency of these experiences, and the obsession around them, in a clinical context he would certainly have been considered suffering from some mental pathology. Yet he has become a “professional” Medium, and these visions and sensations seem
to have come under his control, and into what he considers his true calling. Another man, also studying mediumship, had served in Vietnam. He told me he had escaped death three times! The first time I was in a covered truck, leaning against the back with my pack on. Suddenly I felt this heaviness like I needed to slide down... and I did and just then a missile flew over my head. Another time I was in a helicopter and a blue lightning bolt shot through the open part. Nobody was injured by the hair on my face was singed, that’s how close it got! And the third time, I was eating pizza with a guy who walked thirty feet away, and suddenly they bomb the spot where my friend is standing—right next to me. All this was an explanation to my question of how he got into all this “mediumship stuff.” He was always standing next to death, reminding me of again of the idea of trauma as a “missed” encounter with the real (Lacan 1981, 55). Trauma concerns not the event of what happened, but the “missed event” within what happened. As if what traumatizes, what repeats is an affective shock carried in what didn’t happen to us, the unassimilable within what happened but that we didn’t actually experience. What didn’t happen, what we did not experience consciously, was nevertheless experienced in another part of ourselves—taking an affective hold on us, as something that rises up from below the threshold of visible or recognizable events.

Spiritualists are aware that many amongst themselves connect traumatic origins to spiritual experience—it has become somewhat of a narrative, itself related to narratives of mysticism, where bodily pain or illness opens you to the spirit world. However, at least a few Medium have told me that they find this connection overblown, and certainly not always the case. For most of the people I got to know, it was something that opened in them when someone close to them died. One woman, who had worked as a journalist in war zones for many years, returned to New York and married. Her husband died unexpectedly a few years later. She began hearing and
seeing things, messages from him—a self-professed “atheist and sceptic,” she was burdened by these experiences and went to talk to a priest to figure out what it meant. But the experiences persisted. Like a detective following clues, she became a reader of signs, recalling to my mind the strange association between Arthur Conan Doyle, a devout Spiritualist, and inventor of Sherlock Holmes, that figure of deductive reasoning and mysterious intuition. She begins following these strange signs—once after she finally asked him, “are you there?!” she found herself surrounded by a cloud of butterflies. Another time she saw footprints on her bed. Another time she saw the word CIN spelled out. She looked it up on Google and it means “C Sharp,” so she played a C sharp on her computer—and in that instant—the GPS on her phone (which had been turned off) said you have reached your destination. She felt very strongly this was evidence of her husband’s presence. Alone such signs may have not meant much, but she told me, she could sense his presence with her. And these signs were only the beginning she tells me, they soon became bodily sensations of his presence – like a touch on the arm, or just feeling him. Now, she tells me, he is with her all the time. They are inseparable. She wears a large diamond wedding ring on her finger. She is very much married. Maybe more married than most people whose spouses are alive. She doesn’t date, she tells me, I don’t need to! When a Medium she went to for a message said to her “he is telling you to move on,” she was very upset – “he would never say that! That is some bullshit Cosmopolitan advice! She knows nothing about my life or what it means to promise to spend your life with someone… that is a different kind of relationship… we are together for life, and death. But he is not dead, he is here, she insists. Why should people insist that it is “healthier” to move on? She presses. And I begin to wonder with her, why should it be the case that we are told it is healthier to forget the dead – especially if you believe, as a Medium does, that the dead are not dead but with us? Being told to mourn, and lay
the dead to rest, sounds anathema to someone who experiences her dead love still here with her everyday. As we stand under moonlight on a pier in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, talking about spirits, everything appears so close. There is the empire state building, lit up, so close and tall from where we stand at sea level. I wonder if it is like that when you feel a spirit, the world feels closer, yet still at a distance. The outward signs through which she began to know her love was communicating with her gradually became more of a blending, she tells me. Signs, they move from being outside, to being inside, where she can feel him. We talk more about sensation. Her relationship with him is intimate. She does not long for the company of other lovers. And why would she, when her relationship with him is so palpable, she can even feel his touch? When she asked him once what it felt like for him, she suddenly felt her body float up off the bed and toward the ceiling, an incredible feeling all over, arising from the inside of her body, yet larger than her body... more like expanding inside-out into an infinite space...

How do you feel a spirit in your body? I ask the Mediums. Like a stabbing, or a speeding up of the heart, or a pain rising up from a specific place, or your you feel yourself hunched over, like an old woman, or taller, or fatter or thinner. Down the rabbit hole, into a world of expanding and contracting spectral bodies, superimposed upon fleshly bodies. It is Wittgenstein’s question all over again—How can you feel in this body, what belongs to another body? The body is no easy thing to locate, it is deceptive that way, in its seeming indexicality, its there-ness, even in its materiality. For, if spirits are immaterial, how can you have bodily sensations of them—not just mental intuitions, if these are in fact ever just mental, but a sense of touch in the body?

While we talk about him, she can talk endlessly. It enlivens her to evoke his presence, I can tell. It is important to her, to share this experience with someone else not in spirit. Not so much to convince me, I think, but because these stories make her happy. I feel dizzy after a while.
We are lost in conversation and all around us there is a low hanging fog. She is talking about out-of-body experiences and whether the world of the dead is produced by our thoughts. Infinite thought-worlds. She tells me that some out of body travellers have encountered Christians still waiting for the rapture! So somehow the spirits as they move through the spirit world, are entering what are ossified thought-worlds of the living, like that of some Christians waiting for the rapture, a spiritual counterpart, as world, created by their thoughts while living. It is an image of infinitely connected parallel worlds, each spirit world shaped by the thoughts, affections and actions of the living. What a strange parallelism, the idea that our thought-worlds become concretized milieus, like thoughts becoming stones, as described by the spirit Judge J.W. Edmonds through the Medium, Mrs. Cora L.V. Tappan, as he wandered, like Dante through the Shapes he had created while living. Finding himself, now, face to face with his sins of thought and deed, ephemeral things hardened into a landscape in the spirit world. Nothing like confronting your own sins as a spiritual landscape! But perhaps such a confrontation is not so unfamiliar to the living, us creators of the Anthropocene—only here on earth, the planet transformed into a dying landscape of our concretized pollutions…meanwhile, they are still there, waiting for the rapture.

Mediumship colors the world differently. If the spirits are among us, we live in two worlds at once… like a consistent fog that has settled in the streets we walk everyday. And the Medium’s practices lie somewhere between the ordinary, considered a natural extension of one’s intuition, and the aberrant— according to our teacher C., who even called mediumship an aberration of the brain… adding with a playful shout: We are fabulous in our “craziness”! As long as its Witch and not Bitch, I would not worry!”
3.5. Communicating the Incommunicable: Sensing the Insensible

Spiritualism arises from within the gap separating empirical sensation from invisible realities, the gap within things sensed and felt, that “paradoxical immediacy that constantly withdraws and cloaks itself.”40 The secret secretes and every revelation is also a concealment.41 What the spirits communicate, across gaps ontological and epistemological, is the gap itself between the seen and unseen, the living and dead. The spirits present themselves in intimations, “a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call “something there,”—to borrow William James’ language—an affection of forces unseen, forces that seem to exceed sensation, and yet are experienced as “the reality of the unseen.”42 The epistemological problem of discerning a spirit as spirit—arising from a sensible experience—is inseparable from the ontological problem of mediation across realms thereby invoked.

Eugene Thacker has called “dark media” an “understanding” of “media as embodying a basic paradox: mediation as those moments when one communicates with or connects to that which is, by definition, inaccessible.”43 Dark media concerns meditation that has its condition in “excommunication”— evoking excommunicated heretic—even as it may produce an excess of communication. But this is larger claim about the very nature of communication, as conditioned by a fundamental negativity: “communication cannot be thought apart from its own annulment.” Within an always prior “excommunication,” communication collapses at the extreme point of the “two poles of mediation—that of pure immediacy and that of total opacity.”44 Drawing upon the

40 Thacker, 95.
43 Thacker, 81.
44 Ibid., 80.
via negativa of “apophatic” wisdom, as found in Medieval mysticism, Thacker calls darkness of communication, the “double movement in which the communicational imperative is expressed, and expressed as the impossibility of communication.”

Among the Mediums I have come to know the so-called “impossibility of communication” is never expressed as such. If anything, there is an excess of communication around spirits and spiritual experience that seems to circle around a central opacity, as the condition of possibility of the communication. I noticed consistently during my fieldwork that the Mediums and Spiritualist practitioners more generally, never stop talking. Far from the hush of the sacred, it often seemed to me as if the noise the spirits make, when allowed to escape through the mouths of the living, is endless. In precisely developing techniques for communication with spirits, there is an excess of communication that seems to bubble and shore around the incommunicability of death. As such, it could be said that Spiritualism addresses itself to a broken silence—the silence of the dead who speak to us, at first by rapping, and later by more sophisticated means. This broken silence produces an effusion of communication.

Still the question lingers, does mediumship simply put the “spirits”—and death, for that matter—to work in a ceaseless communication, widening its embrace to close in upon any outside, absorbing the silence of death in always more communication? What I have gathered is that all the talk about spirits and spiritual experiences complicates our relation to the otherness of death. It seems to make death more mundane insofar as the spirits can be reached, and rather disappointingly, rarely have very interesting things to say—one often hears only the most banal greetings for the living—in stark contrast, it seems to me, to the exciting “quickening” the Medium experiences in sensing the spirits. Here, communication seems to flatten the otherness

45 Ibid.
of the spirit world. And yet, what simultaneously holds the mystery in place, is the excessive talk about experience as such—as if, in all this enthusiasm, something remains out of reach, but out of reach in a proximate way. Addressing itself to something far away, yet close enough to be touched, seen and felt and this always only in moments—in such moments, I want to say, spiritual experience excites experience as such, or enlivens us to our capacity to have experiences, for something to happen to us that belongs to us in an always singular way. In this way, the ongoing talk about spiritual experiences amongst Spiritualist practitioners and Mediums appeared to make room for experience as such—as if giving value to what, Walter Benjamin feared, was already disappearing in the wake of WWI, namely, our ability to tell stories, and thus value our “experiences” as “among our most intimate possessions.”

If the Medium follows an “imperative to communicate”—to affirm one’s experiences of spiritual things—it is in an attempt to continuously, and evidentially, prove the “continuity of life” through a negation of the negation par excellence (of death itself). All the talk from the spirits, and between Mediums about their experiences of the spirits, has the strange effect, of requiring ever further “demonstrations of evidence,” not only for an audience seeking messages from their loved ones, but, I would say, for the medium’s themselves. While on the one hand, mediumistic practice seems to make room for experience, on the other, this seeming deficit in proofs always hovering above the incommunicability of death itself, in combination with the imperative to communicate, has the strange effect of making the body itself a source of doubt.

As Janet, a well-known medium and founder of a Spiritualist Church in New Jersey, once put it to me: “doubting is very normal. We say to ourselves “are we making it up?” It’s only in

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the validation that we come to say, gosh, there is something to this.” She paused and thought for a moment, recalling the words of a fellow medium known for healing people under trance, who said: “It wasn’t one message, it wasn’t one body of evidence, but years and an overwhelming body of evidence… that convinced me there was something to this.” We spoke further about mediumship and about building this “body of evidence,” which is at the same time the building of trust in the mediums own experience.

Trust concerns, to my mind, the dynamic triadic relation between the sitter, the medium, and the spirit, where the sitter’s outward verification of the information the Medium presents establishes “trust” in the sitter toward the Medium, and thus “in” the spirits, but also grows “trust” within the Medium concerning her “inner” spirit experiences. Each moment of verification builds this trust, but also furthers a sense of seemingly inexhaustible awe and enthusiasm around the fact of communication, as the fact of the incommunicable: “It still blows me away! Everyday something blows me away and I can’t believe it is coming out of my mouth, so it leaves me in awe of my own gift. […]” and Janet added, “in awe of the intelligence of the spirit world.” It is as if you cannot hold onto the experience, not for long—it seems always to recede, or to become shadowed in doubt, such that every communication carries the sense of it being, each time, a small miracle.

If the body “has always been a medium, and, in fact, is the most primordial medium,” as I’m arguing, the practice of mediumship puts the potentiality of bodily extension in relief, by focusing on the centrality of experience. Experience, however, raises a spectre of doubt in the body, or at least the bodily sensorium—about what one sees, hears or feels—thus requiring careful training in “techniques” of discernment. The paradox, I would locate in such experiences

47 Wegestein 2010. 33.
is that the experience speaks for itself, authorizes itself—“I know that happened to me”—beyond a shadow of doubt, while upon trying to find the adequate discursive, social and symbolic space in which to express the experience, to make sense of one’s experience, doubt enters in. It is my sense that this is only part of the story of doubt, when it comes to the problem of spiritual experience. Let us call this aspect, the problem of finding an “adequate interpretant,” to use Peircian language. Here, however, we must also locate an always prior moment of doubt—before the externalization of inner experiences “into an environment” — one that begins in the Medium’s attention and attunement of her body, which requires a simultaneous estrangement and distancing of the body, as mediatic object or instrument rendering proximate fugitive sensations. It is in the moment when the body is doubled, as subject of intimate experience, and instrument of alien affects, that doubt enters in. The emphasis on experience in Spiritualist practice, is here always pulling evidence along with it, and the emphasis on one’s capacity to discern, and thus name the spirit as spirit, has the double effect of engendering both a trust and doubt in bodily experience.

Spiritualism makes the dead speak and thereby proclaims—There Are No Dead!—and this imperative to communicate, concerns messages that must reach across gaps between the unseen, and the seen, the spirit and the medium, and finally between the medium and her audience. Any adequate understanding of bodily mediation, in the context of mediumship, requires a pulling at the threads of how Spiritualism confronts the problem of sensing and communicating, across the very gap of the insensible and incommunicable.

48 Britten 1999.
3.6. The Mediation of the Body

The many dead pushed under (unterlegt) or above (transcended), yet still haunting the present, as abstract figures do, are drawn near by the Medium, who brings images into the body, making the body, as the space of sensation, an object of attention. *Our bodies are our instruments,* they say. And Marcel Mauss wondered if the “body” is not “man’s first and most natural instrument” (Mauss 1973, 75). The body is an instrument that takes shape and gives shape to the social, an instrument of style in this sense, which Mauss gave ample examples of: of how people walk, swim, march, wash, dance, jump and sleep. But next to these more mundane techniques, Mauss believed that even “at the bottom of our mystical states are *techniques of the body*” (1973, 87). If the body is not, only, the subject but also the object, of our attention, as our “first instrument,” the point at which the body ceases to be a subject and becomes a corpse— the point of death— seems to reveal death’s intimacy with bodily mediation, and even the technical extensions of the body.

Thus Kittler points out that when Edison invented his phonograph in 1878, one of its intended uses was “to record ‘the last words of dying persons’” (Kittler 1999, 12). It was a “small step from such a ‘family record,’” to the “fantasies that had telephone cables linking the living to the dead,” as that particular vision of the Spiritualist Medium as Spiritual Telegraph. For spectres haunting media, we need look no further than the use of spirit photography in the 19th century, itself arising in the Spiritualist séance, to create a photographic proof, as indexical witness of spectre presences—the irony being that such images of bodies coupled with spirits are proof of the bodies own doubleness, its own extension as image, forever slipping through the cracks of indexical placement. And in the context of fieldwork and ethnographic writing, itself a magical medium, Taussig says of the photographs of that participant-observer par excellence,
Malinowski, in his parodic staging of the anthropologist mimicking colonial authority, dressed in all “white” and hovering like a spectre next to the dark bodies of the Trobriand Islanders, that he was “floating above the plane of the photograph” (2009, 121). And in making himself a spectre of whiteness, this performance of “the Anthropologist” is a staging that reveals and conceals both the stage “magic of the colonial officials,” and the real play of everyday fieldwork, in which the observer becomes the observed, the anthropologist enacting his own “dream images of possible scenarios” of the anthropological imagination, “all actors enjoying their dreamtime séance” (2009, 126-127). The ethnographer here, as Taussig shows, makes himself, Malinowski, in his staging of these make-believe scenarios—the “instrument of ethnographic observation,” both subject and object, and not unlike the Medium, I want to say, who makes her own body an instrument of the spirits. In both cases, the instrument—that which is normally forgotten behind the scenes—becomes the object of attention.

And if a fear of early photography, as an extension of “man,” lay in its capacity to capture the filmy spectral layers of the human spirit, or the soul, such fears implicitly understand the body as made-up of images, images that can be captured in external containers, or media, like filmic emulsion. It also reflects the fear of the alienating effects of technologies on bodily knowing—that the body itself would come to be displaced by technology. This is reflected in Levi-Strauss introduction to Mauss’ *Techniques du Corps*, where he says he believes such “knowledge of the modes of the body” to be “particularly necessary for an age in which the development of mechanical means of man’s disposition” has the effect of deflecting “bodily means in any domain except that of sport” (Levi-Strauss 1987, 8).

Given these intimacies, only touched upon here, between media technologies and the dead, Kittler wondered if our mediatic extensions are not first and foremost places for storing the
dead—thus the capacity for “storage and transmission […] of a given culture” is said to be the measure of our spectres, the measure of our particular “realm of the dead” (Kittler 1999, 13). If that is the case, North America stores an incredibly large “realm of the dead,” in its virtual clouds. Storage of the dead, either in film or other communication media, means the dead have become “technically reproducible,” leading Kittler to make the mysterious claim that “once memories and dreams, the dead and ghosts, become technically reproducible, readers and writers no longer need the powers of hallucination” (1999, 10). What does this mysterious claim mean? What could Kittler have in mind with the “powers of hallucination”—surely we could easily respond that readers and writers still hallucinate and dream. Or if he is saying that the dead, who once lived in “memories and dreams” now are congealed, that is stored in our mediatic extensions, what, then, would it meant to harness the power of the dead, or the spirits—of invisible forces and pasts? How do the spirits re-enter the body, even as they have become externalized hallucinations stored in digital code?

Perhaps Kittler is pointing to how the reproducibility of the dead further detaches the dead from the bodies of the living—not only because modernity made mourning a problem, but because it forgets the sensorium of the body as a primary instrument for such mediation, to borrow Mauss’ language, even as it produces sites of tactility and sensation outside of the body. We do not need the body to dream our dead, for the dead are everywhere figured as reproducible, that is, revenant spectres in our mediatized world.

What does this mean then for the body, if the body is that first porous container that receives the visible and invisible extensions of others, and the instrument through which we extend a second-body into the other containers of the world—other bodies, dwellings and objects? The Medium, it seems to me, directly addresses herself to this problem, as medium of
the mediation of bodily sensations and invisible presences. The Medium, as I have tried to show, makes of her body an instrument for drawing the spirits near, thus reclaiming the domain of dream and hallucination, the power of the somnambulist, but now as a waking power, a power she has “control” of, as an agent of mediation. She draws the externalized images, our social hallucinations as much as the dead pasts, back into the body, making the body the foremost instrument of spectral Shapes, even as she analogizes the body to other media. Couldn’t we say that the Medium, in making her body a machine, an instrument, of mediation and fetishizing herself as an object, effects a sort of restoration between sensuous contact and image, much like what Benjamin called, the opening of the optical unconscious, as a potential of visual technologies: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images” (Taussig 1993, 23). Taussig argues this is not a re-fetishization of communication technologies (replacing magic with science), but a way of opening onto a new sensorium that perhaps re-enchants us to the mimetic faculty in its magical convergence of tactile world and image. Here, however, mediumship confronts a problem of communication as well as a potentiality: that all communication addresses itself to the incommunicable (Thacker 2014). I take this to be the realm of the dead, the limit of life—that which is both inside and outside of life at once.

I have in mind, not only the sense that language itself is beset by spectral displacements, as Derrida showed, but the sense that communication has its condition in seemingly incommunicable affects and percepts, of seemingly invisible forces. These are the language of the body—its peculiar semiosis—as a condition of communication. Here, communication confronts a limit, much like the incommunicability of pain, as Elaine Scarry argued. But the body is not silent—rather, I am saying, the limit of the incommunicable, here the dead, is marked
not by silence, but by an excess of communication circling around an incommensurate difference in language—the language of the body. If here communication addresses itself to the realm of the dead, it poses for itself the problem of reception—who will receive my words, my expressions, my self? Such communications make visible the invisible address within communication, like shooting an arrow into a distance… you don’t know where it will end up, and so it addresses itself not to a discrete recipient, but to an always unknown future. But also, when the communicator is a spirit, or, God, as in mystical states, the condition of communication itself appears to be in the incommunicable, which in turn must be translated, codified or otherwise interpreted. In this sense what is communicated, especially in the case of mediumistic experience, and perhaps many other kinds of “religious experience,” carries with it this affective sense of the very incommunicability of communication—along with the sense, that my communication, and thus my sensations, my affections, my thoughts, do not originate in me. Communication here concerns a mediation that confronts the breakdown of mediation, the breakdown of communication—and has as its condition the incommunicable, the divine, the dead, etc.

By example, in the triangulation between medium, sitter and spirit, the medium is the first interpretant of the spirit, she receives the spirits message, their “information,” as the Medium’s say. But this seemingly banal information expresses a difference—coming from a source ontologically other—and must be translated into a code, itself dependent upon the Medium’s experience. And because the Medium is not a perfect instrument, she will distort the information—she will be unable to discern what kind of information it is, and from whom it comes. Thus there is always more sensed and otherwise felt, than what the Medium is capable of communicating—a distance already present in the discernment of bodily affects as such. If what
is communicated—the spirits—rise to the surface from an incommunicable depth, why does this form of communication, of and in these filmy ephemeral phantasms or Shapes, often seem utterly “superficial,” and at other times, “profound”? (Nietzsche 1997).

So when in mediumship the dead are addressed directly, communication confronts its own conversion disorder—both in confronting the limit of communication—death itself—and in confronting the body as limit wherein smooth communication flows stutter. The body limits communication, insofar as the body speaks its own language, irreducible to linguistic and discursive understandings. Sensation and affection exceed their conversion into communication, or “information.” Benjamin critiqued the idea of information as a way of relating events that had come to replace storytelling, presenting us with only that part of the event that was recognizable, that could be all too easily verified. Following Benjamin here, it seems information reduces experience, the material of storytelling, as much as language itself, to something that can be easily digested, like a sound-byte. And perhaps this holds for mediumship as well—for while the Medium presents her sitter with what Spiritualists call information about the dead—from names to habits to shared memories—the recipient doesn’t necessarily feel this to be an event of spirit communication, until, as one Medium told me, the information is folded into an experience of the spirit. That is why information alone is never enough—it has to be folded into a point of affection, to move from simply reading and communicating signs to feeling presences.

Mediumship, in converting the experience of being affected by spirits to information that can be recognized by a sitter, necessarily flattens the experience she has had, into transmissible codes, recognizable and communicable to someone else. Thus, the Medium is always dealing with sensations that exceed any “code” she might come up with, while searching for new “codes” to expand her breadth of communication with the spirit world.
In this regard, I want to say, mediumship returns us to the problem of the body that feels *too much*, a body, like that of the hysterical, beset by forces and intensities that get stuck in the body. This makes mediumship a practice drawn between *trust* and *doubt*—trust in the affects and sensations that besiege her, and doubt as to what these mean, where they come from, and whether they will be received by others. Doubt is *in* experience from the start. It is generated in the very techniques of the body as medium, insofar as by making the body an object of spirit sensation and communication, the body is treated like something at a distance, as if *the place* from which you perceive the world around you, is inside and outside the body at once. Paradoxically, this distance both opens up the presence of affects otherwise ignored in daily life, while making the body an object of doubt. No longer in the background of experience, the body is foregrounded as a place and space of attention, and these experiences are in turn, subjected to the *other* for verification. Not only, as they say, to prove “the continuity of life,” but it seems to me, to prove the power and authenticity of the experience to the Medium who has the experience.

To demonstrate, as M. told me, means *to show*, and the dialectics of mediumship around trust and evidence, seem to construct experience in such a way as to make it always in need of further *showing*. Evidences of spirit-ual experience thus make experience the subject of doubt, and in feverish need of further verification. And in this doubt, a doubt immanent to this bodily experience (as religious experience), the constant talk (communication) about experience between practicing Mediums seems to further energize the movement from trust to doubt, and back again. The *immediate* experiences of spirits, as made up of images and affects, is here always already *mediated* by the practices that put these experiences into relief, as at once, the ground of trust and source of doubt.
However, the Medium in figuring her body as an instrument, that is, objectifying it, makes this mediation of the body visible—as well as practicable—realizing the body as a mediating instrument of immediate sensory experience. Here, the problem of doubt does not arrive after the fact of experience, that is, not, or not only, when experience must be translated to a community, but is already lurking at the level of discerning sensations, sensations that constitute the experience in the first place. After all, it is only through the process of discernment that the spirits step into the foreground, from the diffuse background of ephemeral images and sensations, to become agentive figures in their own right.
Part IV. The Problem of Experience

4.1. Clouds

“A cloud swims in my head.”

—Virginia Woolf, The Diary of Virginia Woolf 1925-1930

There was another world coming, just like a cloud. It would come in a whirlwind out of the west and would crush out everything on this world, which was old and dying. In that other world there was plenty of meat, just like old times; and in that world all the dead Indians were alive, and all the bison that had ever been killed were roaming around again [italics mine].

—John Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks

In the opening paragraph of Benjamin’s mysterious and layered essay, “The Storyteller,” we find the statement: Experience has fallen in value (1969a). Experience, having something to do with the stories we tell each other and ourselves, “the ability to exchange experiences,” through the “ability to tell a tale properly.” But the stories we might tell seem alien to us—the story of what happens to us, the events that compose a life, become a matter of indifference. And anyway, it is not the story itself, but something woven within the story, protected by its narrative circle, that gives it value and makes it communicable as “experience.” The story must be shot through not with the communicable as such, as in “information” or explanation, but with the event(s) within what happens (Deleuze 1990). I take these “events,” to be the incorporeal events of un-thought affects, sensations and images of the body, below the threshold of consciousness. If events are

49 Woolf 1980, 286.
50 Neihardt 1931, 237.
51 See (Deleuze 1990). To become worthy of what happens to us, which Deleuze understands as a radical affirmation of immanence, borrowing Nietzsche’s usage of Amor Fati—love of fate. In my formulation I am drawing out the notion of “incorporeal events,” as doubling the actual and material strata of “event,” in Deleuze’s thought, to think affects and sensations as something that exceeds their material referents, and which claim us, like “experience.”
both corporeal and incorporeal, always both of actual situations, states and bodies, and at the same time exceeding these, as virtual, immaterial and phantasmic. It is the thickness of immanence that makes everything that happens to us in actuality, doubled by a virtual spectre of intensities, including affects and percepts that exceed whatever state of affairs they arise in. If the story for Benjamin is irreducible to the communication of “information,” it has, I am saying, something to do with affective and virtual links a story composes between our inner experience, what is most intimately our own, and what happens to us.

*The Storyteller* begins with an absence. The absence of storytelling itself: “It is by no means a present force,” says Benjamin, and is something that is growing ever more remote, ever more distant. Yet, in this distance, something becomes visible—like a figure stepping out of shadows we suddenly see an outline, “the great simple outlines which define the storyteller.” But it is the storyteller who furnishes us with these outlines, these simple outlines of life that she makes emerge from the material reality of life itself? Benjamin compares this conjuring of the story from the material of life to perceiving a rock, “viewed from the proper distance and angle of vision” in which suddenly might emerge “a human head or an animal’s body” (Benjamin 1969a, 83). It is as this sense of distance that gives the storyteller her vision of the “great simple outlines” of life.

Not only is the storyteller, from the very beginning of Benjamin’s essay, an absent presence within the text, but the fact of an always hovering absent presence seems to inhabit storytelling as such. This is not accidental, for what Benjamin calls “storytelling” seems to involve a kind of latency—it is that which is inside experience, but somehow hidden in it, untimely to it. After all, the story concerns what is most intimate to us, our experiences:

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52 Not unlike Artaud’s visions of numerical patterns and human and animal bodies emerging from the rocky cliffs in the mountains of the Tarahumara.
“something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions” (Benjamin 1969a, 83). Experience as I understand it, names not so much what happens to us, but something within “what happens.” What is lost with the end of storytelling is the event within what happens, which the story enshrouded in a protective film, giving it an after-life. It is the capacity to weave this hidden event back into a narrative of collective life that makes the story something that can be communicated and shared. The story carries this distance and proximity, absence and presence within it—it meets us as the most intimate of our own possessions, as if arising from our own experiences—yet always arrives from afar. The story releases that which is most intimate within what happens, yet this most heimlich of our possessions is encountered in the story as something unheimlich, as if having crossed great distances and come to us from the depths of the past. It is this doubleness of the story, its intimacy and distance that has something to do with its inexhaustibility. The story has a power that never dissipates, “it resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinate power to this day” (1969a, 90). What is this power inside the story, its energy and affective presence that can be re-released again and again and never exhausted? What does experience name, as that most intimate place that holds and renews the story? What is it about experience that allows us to convert what happens to us into something worth telling? That plunges the events of life back into the depths of things—the depths of bodies as the very matter of life, and the depth of life, its other side, as death itself? “The storyteller” keeps faith with this movement between life and death, between what happens to us and the affective intensities of inner experience. “The Storyteller” says Benjamin, “keeps faith with it, and his eyes do not stray from the dial in front of which there moves the procession of creatures of which […] death is either the leader or the last wretched straggler” (1969a, 97). The storyteller’s work, we might
say, is to enshroud this event within life in an “air-tight” chamber, so that it might make itself felt again and again. In this way the traumatic encounter, as “missed encounter” in Lacan’s sense, is the “seed” enshrouded within the story itself. For what trauma reveals is an encounter with the Other, which is both the other within us, and the other without, and seems to cut across both profane and sacred experience. It is in this “other” within me that I encounter both nature and death. Death is then the point of coincidence between the material world—as in Leskov’s (Benjamin’s model storyteller) stones, plants, and animals—and the immaterial forces of this world. Thus all trauma is the survival, the after-life, of this contact with death as its middle, of a death within life. The storyteller builds a chamber around this event of death within life, he makes a monument of it, which not only makes it visible, it makes it something that can be experienced by a community of listeners. “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death” (Benjamin 1969a, 94).

Benjamin gives us an image, the image of the “human fragile body” standing between two worlds, to borrow the Spiritualists phrase, the unchanging clouds above, and the “field of force of destructive torrents and explosions” below. In the worn out soldiers returning from WWI, Benjamin finds bodies “poorer in communicable experience.” A sea change has taken place:

For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body [Italics mine].

An earlier version of this passage, found in the essay “Experience and Poverty,” reads: “amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds” (Benjamin 1999, 732). A once inhabitable space, presents itself to this fragile human body as a force both terrifying, in the
unsettling alienation it effects, and at the same time suspiciously empty, for it seems strangely
robbed of the past and its traces. Those ephemeral ever-changing shapes — clouds — are in this
image of fragility, paradoxically described as an unchanging ground above, the only solidity that
remains “amid a landscape in which nothing was the same.” The body, looking for a point of
consistency, does not find this point below in the ever shifting terrain of experience, but above,
in the abstract shape-shifting clouds.

What is it to pin one’s ground, one’s home in the world, as much as one’s subjectivity
upon a cloud? Are clouds, like spirits, not flimsy things, saturated condensations of all those
invisible bodies that occupy the cosmos? Lucretius thought so. For him, everything gives off
“films”—like so many clouds—thin vapors that rise off of all things in the cosmos. These
“flimsy films” bounce around and combine in unpredictable ways, to form all manner of
chimerical images that, bumping into us, enter and excite our minds to dreaming (Lucretius 1951,
152-156). When they hit the body, clouds remain as presences, however fleeting and given to an
unpredictable plasticity. Their endurance within us makes visible a fragile reality that has itself
entered the fragile modern body standing “in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions.”

Clouds are like spiritual forms, vaporous condensations of the stories and bodies that
compose life on the ground. If events name the incorporeal intensities belonging to something
within what happens, it is the cloud that gives body to these incorporeal intensities so that they
might, for a moment, inhere in what is called experience. Clouds might here be thought as
condensations of these incorporeal yet sensory events inhabiting the present, as ephemeral
figures that capture something of the intensities, forces and affects they figuralize. A Medium
told me that in order to better see and feel the spirits, you can imagine a cloud figure forming
behind you, enveloping you before it condenses into clearer and clearer words and images in
your mind.

Between the cloud and the ground, there is the middle—the place of the human figure as medium, in medias res, caught between and connecting two parallel planes: earth and heaven, actual bodies and etheric bodies. A cloud forms when the many droplets that hit the earth rise up once again—a condensation of the particular/ate—forming chimeric dream-like shapes in the sky. Following this condensation upwards, the downward movement—precipitation—that which had gathered into a shape is dispersed again, into a multiplicity of tiny watery drops that hit the earth…and the whole cycle repeats in its upward downward spiraling movement.

The Spiritualist Medium is said to exist, like the clouds, between two worlds, as Arthur Findlay put it, that is, between the etheric and the earthly plane. In this between the materialized shapes of spirits flow through the human body, like clouds passing through us—at once, like events, incorporeal and corporeal. These cloud-like shapes are drawn down into the body, bridging the distant forces of transcendence acting upon a body, forces that abstract or freeze the immanent relation between spirit and matter. She is attuned to something invisible, distant, yet more proximate to her than the immediate context of her place in time. It is not context that occupies her, but spirits come from afar. The spirit world connects her to something that puts her in a state of exile, like the half-way figures, somehow “unfinished” and always in the middle, in Kafka’s stories: the “assistants” who are “neither members of, nor strangers to, any of the other groups of figures, but rather, messengers from one to the other” (Benjamin 1969b, 117).

And how does such a body of in-betweeness, neither here nor there, yet somehow always present, constitute its own tradition? Or, to follow Courtney Bender’s question concerning spiritual or “metaphysical” practitioners: “how is a tradition felt and carried when its very practice and theology claim a different reading of history and the past?” (Bender 2010, 5) I’d like
to think of the medium, and the spirits that return mediated through the medium’s body, as a figure who returns the problem of experience to the body of the present—an always displaced modern body haunted by distant *clouds*, or spirits. The medium, by communicating with the spirits of the past, draws distant times and places into the present. And in attending to the often-overlooked sensations and affections of the body, the medium draws the bodily sensorium near, so that it reach into nebulous distances. In a complicated dance of proximity and distance the Medium, in this sense, does not simply re-claim *experience*, but makes experience an object of attention through the bodily techniques of mediumship.

Perhaps mediumship mediates in the way fairytales do. Benjamin says the fairy tale mediates between a dialectics between the mythical forces of prehistory, of the past as endless repetition of the same within a locked background, and the always-in-the-future liberation of the body standing against such a locked background. The fairytale unlocks from this mythical background the forces of the middle—of the present as belonging to “nature.” Nature comes to our aid, as non-human creatures, and animals do in fairytales, and with them, the sense of a negated magical world that casts its ever-present shadow on Enlightenment reason. And Medium’s live in a magical world in which nature is a place filled with spirits that come to your aid. You have to re-enter the magic of childhood, it is source for our mediumship, a teacher once told me.

The forces of nature, and the Spiritualists locate God in the “intelligent” order of nature they call natural law, here reach out to us in the form of spirit visitations, as mediaries between life and death, nature and culture, the human and the non-human. Like the assistants in a fairytale, the spirits are like the cloud-like embodiment of affecting forces that come from afar, mediating the past as determined myth (by locking them down into symbol and pattern of a dead past) and
the future as deferred liberation by modern Enlightenment (by dismissing them as magic, superstition, religion). In this sense, I want to say, the spirits are messengers moving between two transcendent ontologies that claim to supersede the middle, as the place of the immanence spirits, as of bodily experience. Following Benjamin, the fairytale appears in dialectical tension with the stasis of myth, whether of that remembered-to-be-forgotten prehistory as myth constituting a nation, or, we could add to the modern subjects eternal return without a difference to that myth of myths, the Oedipal triangle. Importantly, this idea of a story, a tale, a fabulation that undercuts the predetermining myth, also undercuts the predetermined subject, upsetting the narrative of transformation as a shift from one state to another—what I have referred to as conversion. For it is not to a finished world, or the wholeness of a subject that the fairytale addresses itself, but to a world more akin to the one Benjamin describes in Kafka’s stories, one in which “man lives in his body,” and “the body slips away from him, is hostile toward him. It may happen that a man wakes up one day and finds himself transformed into vermin. Exile — his exile — has gained control over him” (Benjamin 1969b, 126).

If we live in an exile, in the last house that is the body, and even this is always at risk of slipping away in a plasticity of shifting-shapes (maybe the iconoclastic Puritan’s were right about that) — then the body is in a permanent in-between state, or rather, a place of displacement. Neither here nor there, belonging to the present, yet attuned to forces of the past and future that punctuating the present.

The famous medium and prolific Spiritualist writer, Emma Hardinge Britten described the evental arrival Spiritualism in America as the “commencement of a promised new era,” opening a “telegraphic communion between the visible and invisible worlds” (Britten 1999, 27,29). In her words, the modern emergence of Spiritualist mediumship brings about a
reconciliation between two planes of reality: “the ultimation of a science whereby spirits, operating upon and through matter, could connect in the most intimate relations the worlds of material and spiritual existence” (Britten 1999, 29). The world intimated, brought to intimacy, by the revelation of spirit presences, is conceived as suturing material and spiritual, visible and invisible realities, the earth below and the “clouds of witnesses” above (Britten 1999, 18).

Those who went out from the humble change on that night of mingled fear and awe beheld the world they lived in with changed eyes. Every familiar thing to them seemed to wear a different aspect. Something was altered; some mighty, nameless change had fallen on all around them, and though they knew not how to phrase their thoughts in speech, they all and each felt that they were another man or woman, whilst in the air, the earth, the dust beneath them, and the sky above, were filled with a viewless host of spirit witnesses; and that for all they had loved and lost as for themselves “there is no death (Italics mine) (Britten 1999, 33, 34).

The familiar becomes unfamiliar, the definition of unheimlich, un-homely. What is more, they realize themselves caught under the “gaze” of countless others, extending Lacan’s sense, of here a non-human, or at least non-living multitude: the sky above, the air, the earth, even the dust beneath them is filled with “a viewless host of spirit witnesses.” And to become aware of the gaze that precedes us—which for Lacan, I would argue, includes the gaze of non-human and animal witnesses — is to realize ourselves always already “caught” in a gaze that comes before us, such that we enter always upon a stage already laid out by others that construct and are witness to that stage or territory (Lacan 1981).

The clouds, here, have become the shapes of the past, standing as etheric witnesses to our actions, but witnesses that can see our insides as well as our outsides:

Our city streets are thronged with an unseen people who flit about us, jostling us in thick crowds, and in our silent chambers, our secret closets, and our busiest haunts; their piercing eyes, invisible to us, are scanning all our ways. The universe is teeming with them; THERE ARE NO DEAD (Britten 1999).
Finding oneself standing beneath a cloud of witnesses, “scanning all our ways,” is world surveilled by the past that passes judgement on the present—and here the forensic origin of Spiritualism needs be recalled. For it was with the murder of a Peddler over property, an itinerant figure robbed and murdered in the house he visited, that returns and becomes a spirit witnesses to his own murder. The Fox “girls,” as first mediums, are thus called to witness on behalf of the spirit, who is himself the sole witness to his own ill fate; the living made themselves into witnesses on behalf of the invisible past wronged, unredeemed, buried.

In this vision of a world pervaded by spirits, we no longer stand alone before forces that transcend the body of experience, as Benjamin said of the alienating forces of a modern world. Yet, there is an excess following this loss of experience, Benjamin describes: the excess of an “oppressive wealth of ideas” that has “swamped” people “entirely.” This excess of ideas and images that overwhelm the “modern” subject, as too much information (!) is attributed to the “tremendous development of technology” bringing with it “a new kind of poverty,” while unleashed forces diametrically opposed to the life embedded in tradition, alienating and contradicting this life at every turn. Yet, the other side of this excess that alienates experience, is another excess—what I will call the modern effusion of metaphysical ideas: “the revival of astrology and the wisdom of yoga, Christian Science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosis, scholasticism and spiritualism” (Benjamin 1999, 732). For Benjamin, these spiritual practices and ideas, constitute a “new reality”—a reality haunted by specters—comparing this new reality to a painting by Ensor: “in which the streets of great cities are filled with ghosts” (1999, 732). The city becomes a site of absent presences, filled with ghosts and the spirits that haunt the Medium. The spirits having once been wed to places, in sacred landscapes or in the Church, are set loose—deterritorialized and floating across distances, like balloons accidentally wriggled free
from a child’s hand. There we stand, “tiny and vulnerable,” frozen beneath a sky of unreachable ballooning clouds. Perhaps it is this fissure that the Medium inhabits—trying to catch in the mirror of her darkened eye the image of spirits set loose upon the world. Seer of the unseen, she tries to make contact, to draw the spirits near, the clouds back down to earth, if only for a moment. If nothing else, she makes visible, palpable, the fissure itself.

The cloud, for me, is not so much a metaphor but a place. It is the place of the many affective shapes, recalling Kibbey’s term regarding the Puritan Shapes of the body, that occupy the distance, in Benjamin’s essay, between the external reality of a ‘fragile body’ stuck beneath alienating forces, and what he calls our most “intimate possession,” the inner experiences of a body. And our experience, it seems, have become clouded. It is as if experience now floats above the body to which things “happen,” the body that perceives and is affected, in what amounts to a kind of everyday level of dissociation. It is not enough to say that this problem of experience is the effect of a mind-body split, the inheritance of Cartesian doubt; for the problem is how the split spatializes itself in the body, as a “crack” within the body of the subject, as much as a “crack” within the world, cracking-up the world as a world we can believe in (Deleuze 1990). If there is something intolerable about experience today, it is perhaps that we find ourselves in a world we “no longer believe in,” as Deleuze put it, a world in which the phantasms of cinema live a life more ‘real’ – live a “better script”— than the one we find ourselves in daily (Deleuze 2001). Nor should we believe in another world —but to believe in this world is to find oneself in the crack, to be cracked-up, by the very split that is now in the body as the first and last place of the subject. A dissociation both bodily and geographical: for the body stands alone, within a widening gap between above and below: “as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences”
(Benjamin 1969a, 83). The where of the body standing between the clouds and an alienated earth of forces we cannot ‘take in,’ is the place of the present.

HYSTERICAL CLOUDS

Anna’s hallucinations are, after all, acted out—performed in space. Her entire body enters the hallucination and spatialized. She moves through different rooms, she speaks to herself in fragments, she gestures at invisible presences. The stories she later tells Breuer under hypnosis are formed during her somnambulent states—with the full participation of her body. These were initially only daydreams—and Breuer makes a lot of her predisposition for daydreaming, saying that this was what allowed her to “seamlessly” slip into states of full fledged hallucination.  

The daydream is also the condition of storytelling—it is in the waking sleep of “mental relaxation,” which Benjamin attributes to boredom, where “the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience” is to be found (Benjamin, 1969a, 91). The “nesting places” of the daydream, of this state of “self forgetting,” are becoming increasingly “extinct in the cities,” laments Benjamin.

Anna calls her daydreams her own “private theaters” where, in Breuer’s words, she lives out “fairy tales in her mind,” often accompanying her “domestic duties,” like Benjamin’s weavers who work away with their hands while all the while dreaming up tales (Freud, Breuer, 2004, 26).

However, these private theaters reach a feverish intensity in the body of the

54 Michel De Certeau likewise talks about the disappearance of those haunting “hidden places” that shelter the dreamer; it is in these shadowy recesses that “room is made for the void” as the birthplace of “belief” in the world. We are increasingly confronted with a situation in which all places are “no place special” (1984, 106-108).

55 Benjamin says of storytelling, that the “first true storyteller is […] the teller of fairy tales.” “The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had laced upon its chest.” It is in the fairy tale that the struggle between myth and nature is played out –
hysteric. Each image, whether garnered from a memory, a dream, or an external event, remains fully present to her with its full affective force. For this reason, the images of her “private theater” or somnambulant states are not representations, just as the storyteller’s stories are not simply descriptions of what happens. There is something else communicated here, namely, the direct presences themselves: “everywhere there is a presence acting directly on the nervous system, which makes representation, whether in place or at a distance, impossible” (Deleuze 2002, 44). Representation is too slow, it cannot keep up with the direct action of forces on the body. Of course the storyteller, unlike the hysteric, does tell us what happened, and does so, ideally, in the driest possible way—that is, free of explanation of interpretation. But it seems that it is precisely because the events and images that the storyteller presents to us are so bare that they retain their affective force. Anna’s images are likewise without “explanation”—she does not interpret them but acts them out, show the real affect of their force upon her, and communicates this force to those around her. In doing so, she communicates an excess: she is “someone who imposes her presence but also someone for whom things and beings are present – too present” and she “communicates this excess to everyone and everything” (Deleuze 2002, 44). This communication brings the dream into waking life, albeit through an expression that appears enigmatic and fragmentary.

While the storyteller produces narratives, the hysteric produces a montage, whether of single images juxtaposed, or as the rapid succession of different image-assemblages, each with their individual character. In like manner, life becomes transmissible at the moment of death, says Benjamin, through “a sequence of images [that] is set in motion inside a man as his life
comes to an end – unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it” (Benjamin 1969a, 94). It is in these lost moments, in which he “encountered himself without being aware” (as in trauma where the event is that which is always the “missed encounter”), that his gestures become intensified, saturated with affective authority: “suddenly in his expression and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority” which is the “source of the story” (Benjamin 1969a, 94). In a world “after” storytelling, these images have become detached from the end of life and are inserted squarely within life—as traumatic repetition. The hysteric is the “seer.” She is the one that sees these images of the “missed encounter,” sees the real within life; she communicates the excess of these presences that are too much. But the clouds that Benjamin described as floating above the now fragile body, have been brought down to earth, are now inside the body of the hysteric. Anna O. after all, gave the name “clouds” to this intensive accumulation of “fugitive images,” lived out during her somnambulient states. She has received these fugitive “clouds,”

56 It is as if, in repetition, something is repeated, that is excluded from conscious life and yet is that which gives life, and thus experience, its “authority.” That which survives death, which survives the moment of death—is like the survival of so many “shades” or phantasms that haunt the present. These confer value on life, makes us believe in the world, only if they can be re-embedded into experience, that is, into “what happens to us.” The hysteric makes of her body a spastic monument to this death within life, of a past that lives on unredeemed, as continuous presence. Hidden within this past, is also a relation to the body that has been lost – a relation between body and word, thought and sensation.

57 There is an interesting correspondence between Bergson’s use of the term “fugitive images,” and Beckett’s book on Proust, in which he uses the term “fugitive experiences.” But if Bergson is the Proustian philosopher, this is not all that surprising. Both Beckett and Bergson are interested in releasing these “fugitive images” that haunt the periphery of perception, and are closer to a “pure perception” of things than recollections.
which accumulate within her, like tiny monuments, to the stories that no longer have a body, and no longer have a people.

### 4.2. Shannon

My breath was out and I died. All at once I saw a great shining light. Angels told me to look back. I did, and saw my own body lying dead. It had no soul. My soul left my body and went up to the judgement place of God… My soul was told that I must come back and live on earth. When I came back, I told my friends, “There is a God. My good friends be Christians. If you all try hard and help me, we shall be better men on earth.

— Squ-sacht-un or John Slocum, of the Squaxin tribe. 1881, founder of the Shaker religion of Puget sound.  

*When I was on the other side for the first time? That is your question?* She grins and looks at me out of the side of her face. She pauses.

The *near death, near life* experience? The life altering *experience* that everyone said didn’t happen! She laughs then gets serious.

My sister was at school that day. My dad had bought us these beautiful kites, one was red and one was green. And I was the second child and I always wanted to be first. It was a beautiful spring day and my dad was washing the car, my mom was working in the garden…and I asked my dad if I could fly the kite, and he said yes! And I was so excited, because I got to be *first* at something. So, I wanted to put the kite up in the air, and he said I was too little, but I was sure I wasn’t. So he put it up in the air, and then he handed the string to me. And it had beautiful string, because my dad was an artist and liked beautiful things. And I’m holding it on that

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58 Mooney 1973, 756.
wooden stick... and he looked at me, and he put it in my hands and said: “don’t let anymore string out!” And I said ‘ok’... but it was flying so good...

I looked around and my dad was washing the car, and my mom was working with the flowers, so I took a couple of steps back and I let a little more string out... and it was flying so good.

And I looked at my dad and he’s washing the car... And I look at my mom and she’s working with the flowers... and I took a couple more steps back...

The next thing I heard my fathers voice yell, and to this day I don’t know how because he wasn’t looking, and I heard a voice yell DROP IT! and immediately I let go of the kite, but it was too late. The kite had hit the high-tension wire, and it had metallic kite string, there was beautiful golden thread woven in with the green to match my kite. The kite travelled right down, hit the high tension — 220 volt — and BOOM! Right in my heart, BOOM! Right through my body, BOOM! Right through the ground, through my shoes — burnt holes into my feet!

And there I am up with Spirit and I’m just there. And it was so peaceful! Like a peace beyond all understanding. And it was so loving and I was just waiting and I’m watching my mom hold my little body... and I’m just in the white light, my Mom’s holding me, and I’m hearing conversation going on all around me. I couldn’t understand what they were saying but they were men’s voices and I knew that they were deciding whether I would cross-over or come back... and I was really at peace, it didn’t matter, there was no judgment, there was nothing, just unconditional love.

And then, THEY decided.
I didn’t have a choice, it was decided I would return. And BOOM! I woke up back in my body and my mom was holding me, she carried me in the house cause there were holes burnt in my feet. I couldn’t walk. She carried me in the house and layed me down, and she immediately called the doctor and he sent the nurse across the street to come look at me, and I had third degree burns on my feet. Luckily my tennis shoes saved my life—Little Keds tennis shoes—they grounded me! My shoes survived, but my feet had third degree burns! And they just put salve on my burns and told me I was fine.

But I was never the same.

The Kite is to be raised when a Thunder Gust appears to be coming on, and the Person who holds the String must stand within a Door, or Window, or under some Cover, so that the Silk Ribbon may not be wet; and Care must be taken that the Twine does not touch the Frame of the Door or Window. As a soon as any of the Thunder Clouds come over the Kite, the pointed Wire will draw the Electric Fire from them, and the Kite, with all the Twine, will be electrified […] and from Electric Fire thus obtained, Spirits may be kindled, and all the other Electric Experiments be perform’d […] and thereby the Sameness of the Electric Matter with that of Lightning completely demonstrated [italics mine].

—Benjamin Franklin, The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin\textsuperscript{59}

We were sitting one of the velvet covered window benches in the large hall of the Arthur Findlay college. A few days prior I hand entered the main hall, dazed after a long flight and a cab ride from the village of Stansted to this manor scene, reminiscent of something out of a Jane Austin novel. The cabbie tells me he has driven many people to the school, and that it is a place of constant activity in the area. We are coming from the nearby village of Stansted he tells me—

\textsuperscript{59} Franklin 1996, 214-215.
after I referred to it as a town and was corrected—“town is still too big!” The locals, he tells me, sometimes refer to it as “spooks school!” Later, the receptionist, Viv, at Arthur Findlay repeated this, telling me that she seldom tells people where she works because they call it “spooks school.”

The main hall is covered in large oriental rugs, a large mahogany banistered staircase and turner-esque paintings of ships caught on stormy waters and portraits of renowned spiritualists everywhere, as well as one of the Arthur Findlay family. The college takes its name from English Spiritualist leader, Arthur Findlay who wrote a number of influential books on Spiritualism and Mediumship and who “gifted” the Stansted Hall, which was built in 1871, to the Spiritualists National Union (SNU) around 1964, shortly before his death, and with the understanding that it would serve as a college for the “advancement of Psychic Science.”

A black Steinway sits in the corner as you enter, as well as numerous couches, in various edges and nooks. When I arrived that day there were what seemed like throngs of people seated with their suitcases near the reception area—a group of Swedes are there, as well as our group from New Jersey. I came to the school by way of a Spiritualist Church in New Jersey I had began attending. They make annual trips with those interested in further mediumistic training — and its like any other study abroad workshop, for a reasonable fee you are given room and board for minimum of a week or more, depending on the course. There were people from all over Europe that come through the college, among them Italians, Swedes, Germans, and Americans.

To find a more secluded place to sit, I wander down the main hall into an adjacent nook where I seat myself on a beautifully upholstered chaise lounge. It already feels as if another time is intruding on the present, everything is covered in the main hall in rich golds and Burgundies, and there are large windows with beautiful views of the grounds—a landscape perspective from
every side. A woman on an adjacent couch smiles up at me, she is jauntily dressed in a hiking jacket and also sits, very still, apart from the others. I smile back, and so our conversation begins. It is Shannon. I notice her bright eyes, which open wide when she talks. With her short simple hair, her unadorned clothing, her straightforward manner and the smell of cigarettes on her breath, she seems out of place in this otherwise Victorian scene. Then there is her laugh, which suddenly lights up her face and she seems to shine from the inside-out, this sense is heightened by the fact that sometimes when she is talking tears seem to form in the corners of her eyes—either for happiness or for an excess of feeling. She appears to me like a paradox in that first moment of our meeting: utterly sincere and vulnerable, yet somehow mischievous, impish even. I would learn as we became friends that week, that she is already a Spiritualist healer and a minister at the Church she attends in Ohio. She tells me she constantly feels the ‘presence’ of spirit with her and she seems to me in certain moments to be one of the kindest people I have ever met.

Our days were almost monastically spent adhering to a strict, rather English, schedule: morning, afternoon and evening class, punctuated by breakfast, lunch and dinner, and numerous ‘tea’ times in between, finally followed by drinks at the bar, also located in Stansted Hall. For all its quaint habit, like something out of an episode of a British manor drama, there was the uncanny other side of such ordinariness—we were there to talk to the dead.

In this moment in our interview, Shannon is telling me the story of when she first felt herself with Spirit. As she continues her story, you get the sense of electrified body hovering between heaven and earth, itself like an electric kite, then BOOM! Back down to earth, she falls back into her body, into her shoes, into those rubber-soled sneakers that saved her life! And
there, where she lands, returning from the other side, she has no ground to stand on, no one to
catch her, to hold her, to give her a context through which to understand her new knowing…

I felt scared... I felt guilt for not following directions. I blamed myself. What was interesting was
I wouldn’t have felt bad about crossing-over, it was just so loving there. And I never questioned
the voices... there is a higher guidance and intelligence guiding our lives…I’ve always known
that. And it put me in touch, I was aware of things... and I had a direct knowing, a direct
understanding, though I had no context for it for the rest of my life. And I didn’t understand that,
I didn’t understand that other people didn’t understand. And most of my life I was sensitive...

She laughs again. *It probably melted my nervous system...fried the circuits!*

I had a wisdom that was well beyond my years, I had a knowing, even if I didn’t have words, and
that never went away. I was too young to have a language, and I didn’t learn a language for what
had happened… And when we did go to Church, they didn’t talk about those things. So much of
my life I was aware that there was something, but I didn’t know what it was... a lot of times I
was afraid. In my twenties I used alcohol... um, to numb things, which I’m sure didn’t help my
nervous system. Alright…

I had kidney infections for a while after the incident, I was hospitalized a few times. Mostly I just
didn’t understand certain things about my life. I would have dreams that were premonitions, and
I knew that, but I didn’t have a word for it...
I didn’t tell anyone my dreams because our family didn’t really talk about anything. And so, and I’m sure I tried, but without understanding, who would receive that? Nobody had a context for that. I just learned how not to share my inner experience with anyone. And yet I would share information [from the spirits] and I was aware that I would, and a lot of times I would say something [to someone], and I would go like, “I don’t even know how I know that…” you know?

I was sure, it was never about being right... it wasn’t a question ... I was sure.

As I got older, like when I was nine, I actually had visions. And spirit would come through and say, “get up and paint a picture of this NOW…” even though I didn’t understand why at the time, it made sense later in my life, but at times I was given direct information from spirit…and I never thought that was weird.

I would be completely awake, and they would, just, like, give me a message and be like, go do this. They didn’t say it in words, but it was really clear what they were communicating for me to do. And then when I reached puberty, like seventh grade, my hormones kicked in, and it really got...[Shannon laughs] Like playing with the Ouija board one night, and with a pendulum. I was so accurate, and I could feel the presence of spirit—it scared me so bad that I didn’t go there... because in my upbringing I was taught it was bad to talk to spirits... and I thought Whoa, I’m a bad person.

But it didn’t’ feel that way to me. I just had no context for it.
I mean I didn’t feel like it was bad, but I had no one to ask. There was no frame for it in our culture. So I just stayed away… and I payed a price for that. I used a lot of alcohol to get away from it and I didn’t have anyone to process with and no context… and that probably did the most harm of anything. And… that wasn’t who I was and what I was about.

So I quit drinking in my twenties... I went through a series of extremely difficult circumstances, one after another, but I quit drinking, and the good news is, I ended up in a spiritual program that actually gave me spiritual foundation. Before that I had been to church with my mom, but all I knew was that, pardon my expression, what I was being taught, well that people were ‘full of shit’, excuse my vernacular. I mean there were certain elements I could feel... and I knew what the truth was inside me…

It’s like I had a knowing that I had no words for... so I suppose it sent me on a quest. And then the typical mystics journey. I went on a dark night of the soul.

I was clear in one way, but in another way I was clueless. Here’s the interesting thing — I’ve been a psychic my whole life — only if you had asked me, ‘are you psychic?’ I would have said no ... because people who are psychics were people who were evil, who told your fortune, who just wanted your money. So I had no connection to what a psychic is in our culture... and in my training in my family, the people who were Christian could never actually have any of the gifts of the spirit. So it just left me with nothing.
I just had this higher wisdom that was always with me. I could communicate with the animals, the woods, everything. So I had that communication and awareness... it just wasn’t with people and context. I was aware that I was having premonition dreams when I was in college.

Wow I had a dream about my father. It was only the second time in my life I had dreamt about my father. It grabbed my attention so much. He came to me in a dream, wearing black trousers, and a black hat and he said he was sorry. And I knew it wasn’t a dream, that he had come in the night… I knew it wasn’t a dream. I knew he had actually come to tell me he was sorry.

I got a call that next day, telling me that my father had passed.

And I wasn’t surprised and people were wondering how I wasn’t surprised. I was aware that this was around me all the time. That this was too clear and too often, to ignore anymore. So when I stopped drinking and got on the spiritual path, I was afraid of God. I think I was afraid... because from that place I had entered as a child—from where I was returned, before they sent me back — I know I was being sent back for my mother, not for me. So I almost felt on the one hand, it was like a punishment.

Why would I have to leave that unconditional love?

I felt abandoned on both ends... Oh I’m going to cry. Unsupported by my Father in heaven, because he sent me back… and I knew it wasn’t about me, that my life wasn’t about me. I struggled with that aspect of it. And it took most of my life to understand why I was here. And I
had to go through my own rights of passage and development to force me to open up. That helped me find the context. The odd thing is, something inside me had a knowing... like there were times I was suicidal... but there was something inside me that would not let me do it.

But I couldn’t reconcile the love of God and the love of people. And between those things I was just frozen in fear.

There is just no context for it. Shannon’s story has haunted me over these years of fieldwork amongst Mediums. I am struck by the resonances between her story of flying her kite high, of a near death experience, being connected to the dangers of modern life and the mysteries of electricity, a current running through Spiritualist imaginaries, analogizing the body to the Spiritual telegraph, and spiritual energies to electric currents running between bodies. The kite also reminding me of the ever pragmatic Ben Franklin’s experiments with electricity and kites, and the fact that he makes notable appearances in séance parlors throughout the 19th century—the father of a Puritan sobriety being claimed as one of the Fathers of spiritualism. But what stays with me of Shannon’s account, what haunts, is the return that she describes from that spiritual vision – the return into a world which cannot “receive” her, a world which has no “understanding,” a world in which her experience, as her most intimate possession, lacks “context.” And, at the same time, there is no doubt in her of what happened: that is, that she was with God. There is not doubt in her as to the certainty of her experience: I was sure. That part was clear. But that fact could not bear itself out in the world as she knew it: I had no context for it for the rest of my life. And even as she knew, had an inner “knowing” and had felt that “unconditional love,” she also felt abandoned by this experience—abandoned at both ends. On
one end, her family could not understand. The world could not receive her sense, her vision, the truth she carried somewhere inside of me. On the other, God had let her go. Why would she have to be separated from that love that she felt in the moment of separation from her body? Why did she have to return from that visionary state, that visionary place? You can feel the longing in her voice when she talks about that moment. If there is a doubt located in this experience, it is not that Shannon’s doubts what happened to her, but that she doubts, and thus does not have the language for the meaning of what happened to her. And this meaning is what is called experience;… Was God punishing her? How should she go on with this knowing? And how could her mystics journey, her dark night of the soul find a way to endure life?

And bitterly, she realized it was not for her that she had to return—that my life wasn’t about me—she had to return for her mother, or perhaps for others that she would eventually help. There is such much in this phrase: my life wasn’t about me. For it is as an effect of an experience that joins her to a feeling of the infinite, that which exceeds her and yet is in her—this vision of being with God, as one of an innermost certainty and clarity—that has the simultaneous effect of making her feel furthest from her life, which isn’t about me. Maybe it is not so much a feeling of alienation in a modern sense, but a sense of doubt that emerges—a doubt that concerns, not the vision as such, but the after of the vision, as a displacement of the “self” now pulled between heaven and earth, so to speak. This doubt also concerns most intimately the body, for it is through the body, and in a spiritual experience of separation from the body, that the vision inserts itself. To bear out the vision in the world, thus profoundly concerns how one can—in the after—inhabit the body that is at once the vessel of unity with the spirit world and with God, and that which seems draw you back, into the flesh of a life, no longer your own.

The visionary experience is thus lived like a problem—it inserts itself into a life that then
must bear it out like a problem seeking a solution. And there is no going back, no return to the child she was before the accident, before her sense of being with God and not wanting to return. And yet return she must, to the mundane world where there is no language, no words for what is felt, and for what she now knows she is capable of feeling. It seems to me a disjunct is born between the inner feeling of God that remains very private, even as it opens communication, as Shannon said, with spirits both humans and animals, and the outer world of people, culture, or context. We must bear in mind that Shannon came form a Protestant background, and felt that “her gifts of the spirit,” could find no place in the Christianity she had grown up with. And so they were “nothing.” A life drawn in two directions at once, stuck somewhere between the visible and invisible, and with easy way of reconciling these.

By the end of the intense week of studying and practicing “evidential Mediumship,” Shannon and I were dining at the same table with others from our class. Shannon sits down and immediately turns to a woman sitting next to her. The woman had told us over a previous conversation that she was having difficulty with her business, and that she makes spirit inspired paintings on the side. “The spirits are telling me that your business would be helped if you would just stop undermining your work and charge people for your paintings.” At this, the woman got very upset and was clearly offended. Afterward I asked Shannon what happened, and she told me that she thought this woman was really “closed and not open to what the spirits had to say.” When I said something along the lines of, perhaps it was the “context” I which you told her, at dinner, that made her a bit defensive, Shannon turned very earnest and said she thinks we should “say what is in our hearts and share information from the spirit freely.” While mediums are “trained” to be sensitive, what to say and not to say in giving messages to clients, and this is considered a matter of ethical responsibility, Shannon was articulating a tension within life as a
Medium that itself makes such ethical training a topic in the first place. For the seeming unmediated immediacy of spirit communication, which is itself the mediated communicating of a third invisible party, authorizes a form of automatic or inspired speech. And such speech does not mediate itself to context – or filter itself to make itself more digestible – one need only look to the language of the old testament prophets to see where Shannon might have been coming from. It becomes possible to understand how the felt immediacy, or direct experience of the spirit world, allows Shannon to live out what she feels is the “truth,” and yet it still, even amongst other Mediums, this presents a problem vis-à-vis the context of everyday life interactions, in which that truth could be heard or received.

4.3. Aurora

We must first of all clearly understand that the etheric world is part of this world. That it is all about us. That it is material but of a substance too fine for our senses normally appreciate; that here and now we are etheric beings clothed in a physical body and that death only means a separation of this etheric body from the physical covering.”

—Arthur Findlay, The Edge of the Etheric

Aurora sits in a large green armchair with a calico cat on her lap. Her hair is a beautiful red, curly and bright against her pale skin. She is the youngest medium I have met here at Lily Dale, in her early 30’s, and she has become a friend. She is intelligent and articulate. She has an incredible clarity about what it means to be a medium. Over the years I’ve known her she has been completing the process of becoming an official “registered” medium at Lily Dale—a somewhat mysterious process to the outsider, and one that everyone seems rather hush about. It involves a longer term of involvement, over many summers, serving and participating in the goings on of

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60 Findlay 2000, 12.
the Spiritualist Assembly at Lily Dale; it involves “serving” at the “Stump,” that is, Inspiration Stump, the name given to a place carved out of the old growth forest surrounding the village, consisting of rows of wooden pews beneath the canopy, a play of light through the leaves. The stump, which used to be the place where the medium stands to give her “demonstration,” is now filled in with cement and surrounded by a little gate on four sides. The medium stands in front of this gated area now, but still, everyone says of “serving at the Stump” that there is a particularly strong spirit energy, a “vortex” they call it, there which has accrued, concentrated in that place by the mediums giving message all these years. Often people come here at night, in the darkness to sit or to catch a glimpse with their cameras of spirit, or some say fairy “orbs”—little globular lights that are said to be, “caught,” in photographs. One must also serve at the Forest Temple, itself an enchanted place—an enclosed white-framed stage with pillars and on it two chairs. The medium stands on the small stage and gives messages to the audience who sit on outdoor pews, anxious to receive a message of their departed relative. You can feel the desire in the audience. Everyone wants a message. As I sit with Aurora now in her armchair, I think of the repetition of the seated figure in her chair, as a form so central to Mediumship from the many theaters of public services – the stage of the Auditorium, the Forest Temple, to the sitting rooms of the Mediums where one goes to receive a private message after paying a fee, to the séance with its chairs arranged in a circle to concentrate the “energy,” and to democratize the practice. And Aurora was on her way to becoming a registered medium, serving at the Stump, and Forest Temple regularly, even at the Healing Temple.

The Healing temple is a small white chapel, where the healers, dressed in white blouses and black pants, hover their palms over your seated body, Mesmer style, with a firm but focused touch here and there. You enter the small church with stained glass windows from the dirt road.
that runs behind the rows of Victorian houses, just behind the Dale. There are prayer ribbons, colorful strips, tied to the tree outside – they have people’s names on them, people for whom you want to pray. Near the door a woman ushers us in to take a seat in an empty row… when its your turn you go up, one by one to take a seat as a chair with a healer opens up. There are four healers working today. After each session, they wash their hands in a shallow white basin of water. I sit, we close our eyes and she begins: “Father, Mother God restore this body with your light and Bless this healing,” the women said to me as I sat still, with my back straight against the chair… and I feel her presence around me as she runs her hands around my body without touching. Then suddenly she grabbed my hands and pressed her hand against my forehead. She touches my lower back and runs her hand up my spine.” With this she whispers to me, “go in peace.”

Finally, to become a registered medium, which means being able to “hang your sign on the door,” and receive visitors (and payment) who come to the Dale seeking messages, you must pass a test administered by a committee of those on the Assembly, which runs things in Lily Dale and is made up of seasoned Mediums who all have residences in the village. This test appears to involve, in part, giving messages to the committee in great detail, where your spirit connection can be verified.

She is wide-eyed and ready with a smile. There is a readiness for conversation, a desire to talk about one’s experiences, and yet there is a feeling of it being all somehow impersonal. And yet here, at the Dale, sensations and feelings seem to me always close to the surface, thick in the air. Aurora too, betrays her feelings in her face, you can sense her enthusiasm when she talks and the color rises to her cheeks. It draws you in… her sincerity, her commitment, her love of the spirits, of what she does as a medium “between worlds.”
Our formal interview is like most of the talks we’ve had. It flows. Although this time I sit across from her in her little reading room, just off the side of one of the many Lily Dale houses. There is a green armchair with a high back, the kind that should be sitting directly in front of a fireplace. Next to the chair there is a tape recorder that uses CD’s, which she uses to record her sessions.

Unlike Shannon, Aurora came from a “whole line of intuitive types…” In this sense, she is somewhat unique. She never felt alone with her mediumship, her intuition, in her family. The line went back through generations. She remembered sitting as a child while her mother and grandmother and others would sit in what they called their “sewing circle,” in which no sewing went on! And they would drink tea and give each other messages. It was all very accepted within the house, but no one talked about it outside of the house because it wasn’t acceptable. Aurora described her family as “mostly Irish” family living in Ohio, with a mixture of Presbyterians and Catholics, along the family line, but Aurora’s mother had been raised Catholic, so Aurora had attended a Catholic school as a child, which made a difference.

The intuition in the family runs along a matrilineal line, although Aurora tells me her father also had the gift. However, it was her mother who she credits with being “extremely intuitive, her whole life.” And this would get her into “trouble” growing up because “she knew things you weren’t supposed to know.” Knowing what your not supposed to know, and not knowing that your not supposed to know, can be a tricky thing.

Like she can stand next to someone and know that they are pregnant. She was standing next to my aunt, and she suddenly blurted out that she is pregnant. And this was before my uncle knew, before the days of ultrasound. She got into all sorts of trouble.” and she got herself into all sorts of trouble growing up because she would say things to people that they weren’t supposed to know. I tell you this story because it had a huge effect when I was growing up, because she never pushed this on me...
Boundaries, Aurora kept saying, are important—both to know others boundaries, and to assert your own, where the spirits are concerned. You have to understand boundaries, the boundaries of your own body, the boundaries between bodies.

My parents kind of understood that I picked up on people who weren’t in the physical. I didn’t know that that was what was going on! It’s not like I physically saw them…most of the time. It was just that I would… I feel it in my gut,” she places her hands on her abdomen, “because I’m primarily kinesthetic. I would feel something. I would be standing next to someone and pick up that they weren’t feeling well. And sometimes when you talk to someone about it, you know, it makes it a little worse for them—like, oh God it’s showing that I’m in pain! So I had to learn to respect people’s boundaries. I learned how to say things. Like that it was ok to say something like “oh, you know, I feel like you have a little bit of a headache.” You have to be gentle and say nice things to people.

At her Catholic school, where she was taught by former nuns, no one objected to her somewhat strange intuitions, “they all knew what I did and they were fine with it,” not, she adds that they knew she was necessarily “communicating with spirits.” Catholic school gave Aurora a sense of “mystery” she said, with its focus on the “Old Testament and tradition.”

I was a very strange kid. I always felt a calling to a religious life. I never wanted to be a Nun, I actually wanted to be a Priest and I was ticked when I realized I couldn’t be a Priest. That just didn’t make any sense to me. Cause I always felt a strong connection with that female divinity. And I felt sad for the people in the Protestant church because, as I would discover, they don't have that female divinity… but even in the Catholic Church they don't recognize women as being equal, and I found this upsetting—I mean already at eight years old!” After the fourth grade she moved to a private Christian school run by a Protestant denomination, the Assemblies of God Church, and things were very different. “I learned about the New Testament and what other people, what their boundaries were.

Still, as she grew older she found that Ohio had a “very strong metaphysical community hiding in plain site,” and it didn’t matter much what Church you came from, “people would frequently
go to whatever their church was on Sunday and either go to a Spiritualist home Circle during the week, or a service on the weekend. You would go to the local psychic fair and see the priests there…” This I was shocked to hear, having grown up with Baptists in my family, the idea of a minister going to get a psychic reading would have been unthinkable. However, the blending Aurora describes where the metaphysical community “hiding in plain site,” and visited by people of various Christian backgrounds, supports Courtney Bender’s understanding of such communities as composed of “multiple spaces,” religious and secular, “where religious sensitivities and selves are robustly explored and cultivated” (Bender 2010,183).

“So,” she continues, “that was the culture I grew up in, and that was fortunate for me, because I never felt guilt or shame about it,” about her intuitive gifts, that is. Her connection to the Madonna was a strong one: “I remember I had this little toy chest in my room. I would bring home the little prayer cards and somehow I ended up with a little statue of her. It might have been a fieldtrip to the shrine, cause we had one of those... so I had built my own little alter in my room... which is not something that a normal 7 year old does. At the time I was also communicating with someone from the spirit world whom I have come to believe was like a guide for me. She would visit me at night and I told my Mom about it...she asked some questions about it but was satisfied with what was going on, and she was ok with it...I think because I wasn’t scared. I called this person the tooth fairy! Cause’ why else would there be an adult female who visited me in my room at night? That was how I rationalized it anyway. So I had a toothfairy who would come and visit me.” Aurora laughs. She laughs because as she knows, and as I know, from talking with many Mediums about their earliest experiences with the spirits— it is often the case that a Medium will have “spirit” friends that she doesn't recognize as “spirits” of
the dead as such until she reflects upon these visitations much later in life. They are simply
“friends” with whom she talks or plays.

We also had a spirit living in our house back then. When you have a house of
mediumistic people they are going to be drawn to that. I think this spirit came with the
house…but I didn’t like the energy of that person. I knew it was female but I couldn’t see
her, and she didn’t talk to me, and that made me very nervous. I understand now that she
was probably very much confused, and we were, after all, in her house…and she was just
kind of checking it out…but it would scare the babysitters. I mean, things would happen.
Doors should shut on their own, lights would shut off on their own… T.V.’s would turn
on and off on their own. People would hear their name being called. There was a lot of
phenomena that went on.”

She pauses a moment and reflects. “Pretty much everyplace I have lived was like that… until I
got older and learned to set boundaries. You have to ask them—respectfully—for your space. It’s
like saying, “It’s fine if you are here but if you are going to scare people you need to go home to
God… or go somewhere else.” She begins to explain the difference between an actual spirit
residing in the house, “an intelligence” and what is often referred to as “residual energy,” where
the spirit is not actually present but their energy pattern has left a mark in a particular
location…that is why hauntings often involve a repetitive action or movement of the ghost.
Between a presence and a trace maybe there is only the gap of silence—it was the spirits that
would talk to the young Aurora that made her feel comfortable. The silent spirit, on the other
hand, is haunting because it refuses to be mediated, to communicate. Aurora recalls a time when
her family got a new carpet, a fluffy Barbour. “My mother and I were sitting on the couch
watching T.V. and footsteps started appearing in the carpet, they were moving toward us and no
one was there!” adding emphasis, and because such physical apparitions seem to demand a
witness, she said, “And everyone saw it!” Her brother, her father and her mother.

But seeing and sensing things has its difficulties. Troubles. For a time, before she entered
college, Aurora wanted to “turn it off.” To silence the noise. “Intension is everything,” she tells
me. “I learned how to use it when it was convenient, and other times looked down my nose at it.” What caused this shift, this desire to “turn it off” like a radio? Radio, she tells me, is “great for intuition, I mean that is why they are able to record disincarnate voices—EVP—Electronic Voice Phenomena,” its all frequencies. She suddenly gets quiet and a little serious:

Um, really what led me to wanting to turn it off...when I was about 15, I had a fairly major accident that really impacted my relationship with the world around me. I didn’t realize why until much later. Coming from the background of Catholicism and later the Pentecostals...where they talk about guilt and shame and if something happens it is your fault. I felt I was being punished…” Her normally laughing eyes begin to well up with tears. “I remember leaving my body getting up to the ceiling and knowing that I had to come back. And I was pissed off that I didn’t get to go home... I mean, home to God.

Tears are forming in her eyes.

You see, I really didn’t live most of my life in my body... I was always kind of out here... a little ways.” She again extends her arm out from her body. “And it wasn’t really until my early 20’s that I learned how to live in my body all the time. I know how strange that sounds, but I really felt from that experience [the accident] angry and rejected by God. And it took me years to figure out what was going on.

It is difficult to say whether Aurora always felt slightly outside of her body—located in a place just outside of her body, yet still in its orbit—all her life, or as a consequence of the “accident.”
But it was the accident, it seems, that pushed this distance between her actual body and her spirit, or “ethereal body,” further apart. It was the accident that seems to have clarified the fact to her that “I really didn’t live most of my life in my body,” as if experience of having left her body, shed light on her (perhaps already) loose relation to the body. In other words, feeling that one has entered a true home and then “knowing” that you have to “come back,” to leave that home, makes the body seem like a displaced-place of residence for the spirit. The dissociation from the body, in this traumatic moment, seems to push this tension between spirit and flesh to a new
threshold, where the effect of this distance creates a new relation to her bodily experience as such. The body has become alien to her—she does not want to return. Returns are difficult, perhaps impossible, after all, you can never return to the same moment, the same place, the same body. And how do you return to the mundane world, after having been “home” with God? How to you return to bear out a vision?

She explains. “What happened…I was burned. I was boiling water on the stove and the flame caught my shirt and I burned over 13 percent of my body.” I’ve never noticed your scars, I said. She shows me her stomach. Since she has been developing her mediumship she has been healing much faster: “It looks better every year, and I find that the more I do healing, the more it lessens and goes away…” Healing through mediumship, whether self-healing or healing others, has a healing effect on your own body, Aurora explained to me. She gives me an example: “When I had Lasik surgery the surgeon only did one eye at a time... so I had two months where I was only wearing one contact at a time... and during that time I was practicing self-healing, and I began self-healing my eyes. The surgeon said he had never seen anyone’s eye heal that fast!”

You know part of my problem back then was, I felt a presence with me that whole day of the accident. Very strong. And very strong doesn’t mean good or bad, it just means… because you have been practicing mediumship, you understand when you feel a spirit... you feel the air is a little bit denser... and its very strong. I had felt that with me the whole day. And when I went through what happened in my mind, and was asking myself was this some sort of punishment? Now I feel that was my spirit people staying with me and keeping me safe... but you see how that can be misinterpreted and how it turns people off.

You can see how that can be misinterpreted. But where lies the misinterpretation? Was Aurora referring to the presence she felt – that she herself had at first misinterpreted the presence as a
negative one, or at least, that it gave her an ambivalent sense—the presence felt “strong” but neither “good or bad”? And what would account for the shift in her perception of this event—where the focus seems to move from the accident as a possible punishment, or rejection from God, to a focus on this presence as protective, as my spirit people staying with me and keeping me safe?

The very next year, following her accident, where her other body floated up to the ceiling and separated from her earthly body, the very next year, when she turned sixteen, she had a heart attack. They had discovered “an irregularity with the way my heart was built.” This second crisis of the body, her heart attack, she attributes directly to the prior “accident” in which she felt such anger at having to return to life: “I still get upset because I think how stupid it was to have this reaction... and I feel I should have handled it better,” she says between the tears. “But you know, I feel that I physically manifested my heartbreak...it was almost a subconscious way to take myself out.” She pauses and exhales. “It’s the illusion of separation from God that causes all the pain on the planet, really.”

She visited Lily Dale during college through a friend who knew about it. She was invited to sit in a circle and received messages, and it was the first time she had seen “trance work.” And the medium she met talked with her about “Spiritualist philosophy” and she immediately recognized Spiritualism as something she had known all her life. “I grew up around this... and I knew about it already, but I didn’t want to say that I was a Spiritualist because those are the weird people that spend their time talking to dead people!” But now that she has become a medium, everything is different. “Now I can’t possibly understand why anybody would feel strange or threatened by this!” She smiles, “I have to remind myself that not everyone lives like this.”
On her way to mediumship, Aurora began meditating. Learning how to meditate “developed that feeling and strengthened my relationship to God and really turned my world around. It was very healing for me.” She also began taking classes in mediumship development here and there, and practicing healing. She began to feel more and more: this just feels right to me.” She had dreamed of being a photojournalist, but this seemed less realistic that mediumship! ”I realized that it’s kind of a dying art and I would probably starve to death, and that wasn’t it for me.” At the same time her mediumship “opened up more and more…” and she realized what she really wanted was to ”help people.” Mediumship “gave me an outlet to help people and help myself” The more she developed her mediumship, the more she lost her fear, even the fear of “being wrong,” when giving messages to others. “That was tremendously freeing for me.” She learned how to “tune in” and also to “tune out,” her sensitivity, her intuition. Aurora calls this having “a need to know channel,” which means knowing how to “use your intuition in everyday life,” but “not being fully on all the time.” This form of discernment kept her safe, like knowing “don’t turn down this street…there is something that you need to know and it will just come to you.” This balancing act between remaining an “open channel” and closing oneself off to the excess of “information,” so central to practices of mediumship, gave her “balance.”

One of my big life lessons is setting boundaries. Because I will distract myself, by doing for others and taking care of others and not taking care of me. I am extremely empathetic and extremely empathic. Like my Mom can stand next to someone and know when they are pregnant, I can stand next to someone and if I don’t set a boundary… I will feel everything that they feel. Walking into a hospital or a funeral parlor is just… very very draining for me.

This need to set boundaries, and to learn where to feel things is all the more true, from what I understand from Aurora and others, when you feel things primarily in the body and not only in images. You can pick up on people’s pain and this pain affects you. If your not careful, you hold on to it. Aurora is clairsentient, as they call it around here. It means you feel things primarily in
the body, haptically, rather than primarily through vision or hearing. Although, as most teachers
will say, the way a medium ”gets” their information is often a mixture of all three: visual,
auditory and haptic, sometimes even through taste, though one of the senses is often
predominant.

Mediumship rewires the nervous system. “Cause when you develop your relationship to
mediumship your body becomes more sensitive to things... if you used to take 2 Motrin for a
headache, you may only need 1 now. Your body will be more sensitive now... and all toxins,
intoxicant. (drugs, alcohol.) And I am a cheap drunk anyway. I can have a glass with a meal, but
I know what my boundaries and not to go beyond that...cause I don’t want to be out of control. I
know of people who don’t want the intuition and the mediumship, and so they will dampen it
down with smoking, drinking, drugs—whatever they have to do to make it go away, to re-route
their nervous system. So I’m very aware that if I’m going to be a vessel, I’m going to make
myself as healthy as I can to support that.” Being a vessel for the spirits comes with a sensitivity
that makes living the world difficult. As one teacher from Arthur Findlay College told me,
“Mediums are not normal. Energy goes straight to the emotional system—you cannot be erratic!
You have to work at creating a positive, cooperative state of harmony with the spirit world.” If
Spiritualism is a harmonial religion, this refers not only to a harmony between the “natural” and
the so-called “supernatural” (a term Spiritualists reject, given their understanding of the spirits as
immanent to a natural order), but also between the sensation of spirits and the body itself.

I did feel the sickness of others in my body, and that was part of why I wanted no part of
it [mediumship] for a long time. It was very overwhelming...to the point where you can
do long-term damage to yourself. If you feel someone who has neuropathy...in their feet
or in their hands... and your picking up on it... your miserable cause you can feel it. And
your nervous system is picking that up, your mind is saying this is mine, I own it, and
making physical changes to your body.
And this is the doubled edge of mediumship—for it is both about learning how to balance and control the sensory intuitions that overwhelm a body, and yet, about learning how to be more “open” to such sensations. This is especially taxing for the very people most likely to become Mediums—those who are already “too sensitive,” to the world around them. Mediumship is thus like an antidote to the excess of sensations besieging certain bodies, bodies let’s say that are already more porous, more receptive to taking in the feelings of others. For Aurora, taking classes meant developing the boundaries and the “control” she needed to hone her intuition, and to displace to an orbital extension, just beyond her actual body: “they taught me how to feel it apart from my body.” This sense of being overwhelmed by invisible forces, sensations whose immediate cause cannot be located, is common amongst mediums—especially those in the early stages of their mediumstic training. That is why there is such an emphasis on taking control of the communication with the spirit world, of being receptive, but in control at the same time. It is a controlled communication, and yet what one controls is this openness, this sensitivity of the body to the spirit world. Learning how to feel things, or maybe it is better to say, where to feel things, is part of taking control of one’s mediumship. Setting boundaries, and locating sensations. And this pertains, of course, not only to what is “picked up” from what living others feel, but also, as one develops their “mediumship,” on what the dead feel, what the spirits feel, or still feel. The spirits, after all, said to communicate their bodily feeling—although they are disembodied—through the mediums nervous system, and by a strange alchemy something supersensual, the spirit, becomes something sensual, a feeling in the body of the medium.

The medium, in such instances, feels the blending of the spirit body with her own. At the same time, she must learn to locate the feeling of this spirit body. “Are you getting a specific pain? Where is it upon you? Upon your body?” Learning how to locate the pain of others in your
own body also means learning how to control how much of that pain you take on. The simple fact that you feel a pain means your “your mind is saying this is mine, I own it,” and this “makes physical changes to your body,” as Aurora said. Learning to feel things slightly apart from one’s own sensorium, to extend the sensorium and to see one’s body as doubled by this extended sensorium, means be able to locating the pain “apart.” What I’m calling a second-body, as the invisible sensory extension of the fleshly-body, sometimes referred to by Spiritualists as an “etheric” body, is the place allocated to feel such sensations. This second-body is thus both a place, and a nervous system that exceeds the organic distribution of the body—as Deleuze says of the Body Without Organs (Deleuze 2003). In this way, the etheric or second-body, can feel the pain of others, without effecting a structural change in the actual body of the Medium. Often in mediumistic practices one focuses on the extension of this spectral, sensory body—extending ones sensory body outward in order to “get” information from the spirits, as in mediumship proper, or from the person sitting in front of you, as is the case in “psychic” readings.” The extending movement is then followed by an intension—an intensive movement, whereby a space is made within the body wherein this information gathered can be recognized as such.

“You know Janet, who I consider one of my mentors—and she is incredibly accurate—she teaches you to “put on the overcoat” of the spirit,” a tangible metaphor for the way blending feels. But for Aurora, who feels things already in the body, “kinesthetically,” as she put it, this image of proximity between herself and the spirit was a terrifying idea; “I thought, Oh heck no! I can’t go back to that!” So I had to find my way, to modify how she does it. She described to me how she did this, how she pushes the sensation outward so that it wasn’t lodged in her body: “setting the intention is everything. And then when you start to feel it, push it out from your auric
field—I used to have to visualize this, pushing it out… but as you build your relationship with spirit you can determine what is acceptable and what is not acceptable.”

In a sudden movement Aurora reaches her arms straight out in front of her, “I learned how to feel it out here.”

4.4. Religious Experience

There are moments of sentimental and mystical experience […] that carry an enormous sense of inner authority and illumination with them when they come. But they come seldom, and they do not come to every one; and the rest of life makes either no connection with them, or tends to contradict them more than it confirms them [italics mine].

— William, James, The Varieties of Religious Experience

Here, religious or mystical experience appears as an originary and unmediated event. After-the-fact of such an unmediated experience, “religious experience” confronts the problem of social endurance—how to bear out the vision or encounter, and connect the ephemeral experience to “the rest of life.” Further drawing a circle around what he wished to identify as specifically religious experience, James understood such experiences to be marked by a sense of certainty: “there can never be any question as to what experiences are religious,” given “the divinity of the object and the solemnity of the reaction […]” (James 1985, 39). This certainty, however, seems to arise precisely out of the backdrop of uncertainty around religious experience, and secular Enlightenment suspicions, more generally, around affective experience as such. The certainty of/in experience is already caught here within the dialectics of a Christianity and secularity.

The tension between religious experiences and the world, in James’ formulation, lies already in the way that religious experience is understood—as an essentially private event.
Religious experience appears as something that happens in the innermost space of the individual, and thus as something that interrupts the everyday, and is in turn, interrupted by the everyday: the rest of life makes either no connection with them, or tend to contradict them more than it confirms them.” Like a stake repeatedly hammered into the stream of things, blunting and halting the movement whereby what is seen, felt, heard, can become communicable, the “rest of life” gets in the way of such ephemeral experience enduring in the external world.

The problem of religious experience, this time and space of a heightened sensory encounter of the invisible, hovers somewhere above or below the threshold of everyday sensing and doings, as if these innermost apprehensions of the sacred did not quite enter in, not quite make contact with the social world in which things are made to count, to have meaning. This makes the problem of religious experience, one that cannot be separated from the problem of modern experience as such, as both concern the connection, it seems to me, between what happens to us, or something within what happens to us—the affective animacy of an event—and the secular world as context, to use Shannon’s term, in which such events find, or don’t find, their bearing (Deleuze 1990). Religious experience, as itself a concept of modernity, crystallizes the problem of modern experience as such. And here I find resonance between the problem of religious experiences and their endurance in James’ sense, and the problem of secular experience, as articulated by Benjamin, and by modern critical discourses of alienation generally, from Marx to Freud all the way to Deleuze.

The idea that religious experience is unmediated, isolated, “dislocated etc.” as an commonplace understanding of religious experience is a "relatively late and distinctively Western" concept (Bender 2010, 8). Thus religious experience which carries with it a way of experiencing religious experience—as something emergent from a private, individual experience
of the numinous, an a priori event that must, in a second moment, be converted into a social reality—has a genealogy, itself in dialectical tension with the genealogy of religion. Religious experience, as a modern category is unbounded by any specific religious tradition, although has its condition in a broader background of a Protestant framing and grows out of the 19th century Enlightenment attack on religion as irrational, as a residue of “primitive” thought or magical thinking. Seeking refuge from Enlightenment’s widening grip on religion, religious experience becomes a category aligned not with “the head (and reason)” but “the heart (and experience),” claiming the territory of emotional experience that could not be explained away by reason (Bender 2010, 8). As Courtney Bender put it, Enlightenment critiques of “religion and religious reason […] emphasized the irrationality of belief and prompted theologians to shift the space of religious authority”; as such “experience, located in the emotions and affect, and in other religious "organs," became the key to marking religion's unique truth” (2010, 8).

In this trajectory, religious experience as felt religion, also becomes the placeholder of “true religion,” as the originary “essence” of religion, the common denominator underlying the differences in religious traditions (Bender 2010). In the 19th century, and clearly reflected in Spiritualism, the idea of a religious experience is employed as a universalizing narrative—after all, for the Spiritualist everyone can become a Medium. Such conceptualizations of religious experience as “universally available,” were part of a broad discourse in the 19th and early 20th centuries and “provided enormous resources for theologians, laypeople, and social scientists to make the case for a universal religious sentiment" (2010, 10). This possibility of “universal religions of the spirit” as “not dogmatic, ecclesiastical, sacramental, or sectarian,” is related, according to Bender, to a broadly “Protestant as much as post-Protestant" formulation (2010, 10). The idea of an unmediated universal kernel of religion—religious experience—traversing
religious difference, thus “served ultraliberal Protestants and liberal secularists well,” in drawing comparatives and connection to other “religions,” which Bender argues was “used to develop worldly engagement with religious others and to seek out the similar trusts of religious experience within non-Christian religious traditions.” Seeking a universalizing ground for religion as such, however, already had its condition in the modern genealogy of religion, as defined by a Protestant shaped secularity, which posits itself as a neutral and thus universal space from which all other traditions become “particular” religions.

What is confronted in James’ opposition between the “inner authority,” carried by certain experiences, and their failure to be borne out externally, socially, by “the world,” takes up the problem of mediation in its ontological sense—more ancient, and more general—between the divine and the worldly, and addresses itself to the problem of religious mediation as such the mediation between the visible and the invisible, between humans and gods (Keane 2007; Zito 2008; Barber 2014).

If modern “religious experience,” as exemplified in James, presumes that such mystical or spiritual experiences occur in an unmediated inner sanctum of the individual, the problem of mediation is constructed as secondary, in that it concerns not “immediate experience,” which it takes to be authoritative and authentic, but the problem of converting immediate experience to an external world that will either confirm or deny the experience. However, if we take mediation to be an ontological problem, first and foremost, one that deals with the relation between visible and invisible bodies and forces, and how invisible presence is made tangible to human experience, religious experience too, is always already mediated. Experience is mediated epistemologically, as a modern concept that comes into being as an effect of the dialectical tension between reason and unreason (and all that this stands in for: emotion, sensation, affect,
imagination etc.) and arises from within the *difference* between secular reason and religion. And because religious experience concerns the body as the material center of mediation, in which invisible forces come to bear on a body and arise out of a body, experience is mediated by both the visible and invisible ontological worlds a body inhabits, cultivates and claims.

In this way, the category of religious experience in the Anglo-American context, is mediated by inheritances of a broadly Protestant and iconoclastic mediation. If Protestantism, particularly in its more iconoclastic variations such as the Calvinism practiced by Puritans, casts a radical suspicion on all forms of material mediation, effecting as Weber said, an “unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual”! (Weber 2001, 61). And within this inheritance, the body becomes the central, and only point of mediation, the access point of immediate experience of the divinity or spirit, and the central *place* of religious experience. I am not ignoring the centrality of scripture within Protestant faith—*sola scriptura*—but encountering God, as religious experience, occurs through the “organs of the body,” as Bender points out. Erin

The body is thus the place where a knowing that constitutes religious experience, unfolds. Thus what is narrated as “experience” in the religious context, as Ann Taves points out in her definitive work on religious experience, begins with the knowledge of the body, a knowledge that operates below the threshold of consciousness. What is called “experience,” Taves argues, originates in the Anglo-American tradition with the Puritans whose emphasis on the direct experience of God, or “inward” or “heart” religion, emphasizing the felt experience of God over religious formalism, and aligning the “inward sense and feeling of what is outwardly read and heard,” with “experience” (Taves 1999, 16,17). Experience, is here the name given to a particular event of inwardness that corresponds to an outer encounter, in the context of Puritanism, with hearing the word of God and reading scripture. I will return to the importance of
Puritan narratives a little later. What is interesting here, is that the name given to the intensive movement of feeling and affects in the body—a feeling of inner unboundedness—corresponds to an outer encounter, experience being the name of this fragile link between inside and outside. Thus the breaking of that link, the failure to convert inside to outside, or outside to inside, makes, I am saying, experience a problem. To talk of religious experience as the experience of the porosity of the body, puts the problem of experience into the body, in the non-thought of the body (Deleuze 1994). In other words, religious experience makes visible the problem of experience in the modern sense—insofar as religious experience crystallizes the disjunct between the events of the body, its affective sensorium, and the world. And, this disjunct has a history.

The conceptual architecture and language of religious experience, from the Puritans to William James, Taves tells us, arose in a dialectics between religious “enthusiasm” and “formalism,” as these were mutually constituted in relation to Enlightenment thought (Taves 1999, 16). Enthusiasm broadly designated a class of “seemingly involuntary acts” including: uncontrolled bodily movements (fits, bodily exercises, falling as dead, catalepsy, convulsions; spontaneous vocalizations (crying out, shouting, speaking in tongues); unusual sensory experiences (trances, visions, voices, clairvoyance, out-of-body experiences); and alterations of consciousness and/or memory (dreams, somnium, somnambulism, mesmeric trance, mediumistic trance, hypnotism, possession, alternating personality).” Situating the “contested space” of religious enthusiasm, across religious and secular divides, within the history of Anglo-American Protestantism, and its outliers, from the early 18th century to the “rise of the psychology of religion and the birth of Pentecostalism in the early twentieth,” Taves notes that the “quest for explanation” of “enthusiasm”—explaining experience in terms of natural, instead of supernatural causality—was central to the Enlightenment project (1999,19). Enlightenment thought from
psychology to political philosophy, is thus thoroughly shaped by its attempt to secularize religious experience as pathological and politically dangerous.

The prehistory of enthusiasm, according to Taves, predates the 18\textsuperscript{th} century Protestant movements and may be traced back to the Puritans, who, dating back to the Civil War in England of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, are considered the first \textit{enthusiasts} in this trajectory, and were considered a threat to the monarchy (1999, 46). Thus Taves locates “enthusiasm” as arising with the Puritan emphasis on inward or “heart” religion in the mid 17\textsuperscript{th} century; the inner experience of God was so central to Puritans, that they disparaged the “absence of experience as formalism,” the empty form of religion without the feeling. Enthusiasm, interestingly, to formalists as well as to secular thinkers, were understood not only to be falsely “inspired,” but to have “false experiences.” (1999, 16). The distinction between “true” and “false” experience, and the ability to discern between these, assumes doubt as an inherent problem of experience. Religious enthusiasm is marked by an expression of an inner affects—the place of affection—and outer “involuntary” bodily expressions. In the absence of these, according to the defenders of enthusiasm, religion is only formal abstraction (Taves 1999, 17).

I return to this history, because it is of importance that the Puritans, whom I have discussed in the context of North American settlement’s spiritual inheritances, inform the modern antinomies held within \textit{religious experience}, as formative of settler experience as such. As I will show, the first generation of Puritan separatists to arrive on the shores of New England, as the first “enthusiasts” of Anglo-American settlement, sought a new kind of conversion narrative for a “New World” experience, one emphasizing inner experience as “the work of grace upon the soul” (Caldwell 1983, 65). Through public demonstration of one’s personal experience of saving grace, the sinner finds narrative relief in a culminating expression of God’s
grace and restoration (I was lost but now I’m found). The conversion narrative is the performance of conversion, as “a story people tell about themselves” before the public of the Church, that establishes outward “evidence” of one’s spiritual state and thus paves the way for admission into the circle of the church, the fellowship of ‘saints’ (Caldwell 1983, 159). This new kind of conversion narrative, however, begins to *stutter*, tripping on the bone-in-the-throat of affects and feelings for which the newly arrived Puritan’s could not find words. Patricia Caldwell, in her analysis of Puritan conversion narratives, argues that these narratives, present us with an “artistic form” that makes visible “a certain problem, especially on the American side of its development, having to do with the expression of feeling” (1983, 159). The stutter becomes audible as a problem of converting *inner experience*—and the excessive affects of an encounter with American SPACE or wilderness as *untamed outside*, as much as the “native”—into a redemptive narrative of Experience. The Puritan separatists who left the shores of England in their exodus through an oceanic desert to the Promised Land, the New World, understood their physical movement, their following of an ever-receding frontier, as a spiritual movement. The outer crossing was then, always also understood as an inner, spiritual crossing. We find in this disjunct between inside and outside, an excess of experience, an unconvertible remnant. This remnant is the stutter in narrative that erupts *after* the passage *across* space, arresting the linear movement of narrative as much as crossing. And, as Keane points out, the problem with conversion is that it never ends: "one is never converted once and for all" (2007, 50). Conversion is unending, because there is always a return. And yet, conversion refuses its own returns for it is linear in structure: conversion breaks from the past. This seems to give conversion a particular restlessness, a particular animacy. In this sense, the logic of conversion I wish to address, and which Keane says is “immanent in the reforming character of Protestantism,” is also, therefore,
deeply modern (Keane 2007, 50). It is this logic, part and parcel of the endless reform that conversion names, that gives Protestantism its own particular animacy or “restlessness,” as continuous “revival, restoration, and reform.” In this restlessness, conversion is marked by possibility, and “transformation” is always “lurking” (2007, 50). Even “settled Christians can be subjected to conversion all over again.” What is settled can always be unsettled.

The conversion narrative as literary form, brings the problem of experience into focus, in that it concerns both the problem of religious experience and the encounter of settlement. In other words, I am saying, the Puritans points to the problem of a uniquely American experience—for it makes the problem of experience visible in new ways, as, what I am calling a conversion disorder. As Taves put it, there were deep “passions” aroused by “the spectre of enthusiasm” in North America through the “eighteenth and into the nineteenth century,” and the problem of enthusiasm is to be understood as a “wound deep in the Anglo-American psyche” (Taves 1999, 17).

What is interesting to me is how this wound within religious experience, reveals the entwinement with the problem of what a body is, and thus what kinds of agency and knowledge it can mediate. If enthusiasm becomes the name for “false religion” and “false experience” it seems in large part because it has to do with bodily knowing, and the fear around automatic, involuntary and otherwise affected or afflicted bodies—in other words, a bodily excess. Even Protestant reformers more sympathetic to religious enthusiasm and “moderate” supporters of the “transatlantic awakening,” such as the well-known Congregationalist minister Jonathan Edwards, took pains to make “distinctions,” to figure out criteria for the “discernment” between true and false revelations. While Edwards argued that the presence of visions or bodily effects did not “rule out” the operation of the “Spirit of God,” they also did not authenticate this operation. Thus
for Edwards, the true locus of authentic religious experience, is a place of inner experience beyond imagination and even the “accidents” of bodily mediation. And imagination harbored “false religion,” delusion etc. as “the devil’s grand lurking place.” As such, “imagination and phantasy,” the place of phantasms and simulacra, lead the devil into the soul—and always by means of the body as the medium through which “animal spirits” may act upon a creature (Taves 1999, 40). The suspicion around the imagination, its delusions, and its close proximity to the body more generally, make the images of imagination, if not the mark of “false religion,” certainly accidental to the manifestation of “true religion.” Thus the suspicion around how images get into the body and affect a body, is present even within milieu of Protestant awakenings that form the backdrop of Spiritualism in upstate New York. Interestingly, Taves notes that Edwards concern with the role of “fixed thoughts,” as that which so “swallowed up” the “whole soul […] that all other parts of the body are so affected so as to be deprived of their strength,” prefigures “late nineteenth-century discussions of the role of “fixed ideas” in hysteria and hypnosis,” and I would add by extension, the conscious practices around the power of unconscious thoughts, sensations and mental images in Spiritualist mediumship. The history of religious experience, in its dialectical tension with secular thought, has the effect of further and further purifying, or abstracting, the space of what can be called “true religion,” as much as “true experience” (Taves 1999; Bender 2010). That which can be considered authentic or “true” experience recedes further and further into the innermost chambers of the body. Even the fact of comparability— comparing religious experiences to another, or “Protestant bodily experiences to the “fits” of the mentally ill”— comes to be a marker of false experience insofar as they are explainable in “naturalistic” or scientific terms (Taves 1999, 45). The opposition between scientific explanation and religion is reified in the resultant demand that authentic religious
experience be something utterly “unique,” incomparable and beyond explanation.

No wonder, says Taves, that the history of the “interplay between experiencing religion and explaining experience,” shows that the theoretical abstractions of experience, whether religious or secular, and the experiences themselves, have mutually constituted one another. And moreover, that the explanation of religious experience in secular terms, by Enlightenment skeptics such as Hume, had a “significant effect on shaping the academic discourse of religious,” says Taves (1999, 20). On the one hand, while the embodied and lived antinomies of experience have shaped the academic study of religion, and the demarcations of secular thought; on the other, narratives of experience include “implicit theoretical and explanatory commitments, such that the need to explain experience” has shaped the way believers experience, and narrate their revelations (Taves 1999).

It seems to me what is perhaps strangest of all in this Anglo-American history of religious experience, is that the very bodily experiences that mediate what is called religious experience disqualifies, in the eyes of secular discourse, such experiences as “false experience.” And why do these extreme affective and visionary states, as a form of bodily knowledge however unconscious, seem to draw in the need for “explanation”? One need look no further than the “theater” of hysteria, to see how compelled psychiatric power was to explain these states of the “hysterical” body, considered grand simulations —displays of false experience—of the overly-imaginative and weakly disposed female mind. Or, to the Spiritualist séance where the mostly female medium was poked and prodded both by “investigators” within the movement and without, who wanted to explain the trick. It seems to me the skeptics of religious “enthusiasm,” are as passionate about explaining and debunking these experiences as those who are having them are certain of their reality (however difficult to express). What is it about the expressions of
the body, the somatic language of affect, imagination, and gesture that so seems to call forth this

desire to “explain”? In a circular logic, the marks of “true” religion includes that it not be
explainable, while “false religion cried out for explanation” (Taves 1999, 45). I could here easily

go on a tangent of thought around the strange correspondences between the secular demands on a
“true”, or religion for that matter, and the national story as “family portrait,” that needs the
“authentic” Indian in its picture, as holder of a unique and incomparable “traditional” culture,
against the backdrop of a linear modern temporality of constant change and crisis.

Religious enthusiasms of the “transatlantic awakenings,” that form the backdrop of
modern Spiritualism, were considered by many Enlightenment skeptics and the more
conservative factions of Protestant Churches, to be a dangerous and leading to “radical
democratization,” aligned as they are with chaos and the dissolution of social order (Taves 1999,
46). Yet, it seems to me, the fact that religious experience was pushed ever further inward, itself
embedded in Protestant oppositions between inside and outside, and thus the dialectics around
mediation within Protestant and secular iconoclasm, made it possible for Hume to say that
“direct inspiration,” unmediated by “rites, ceremonies and holy observances,” couldn’t be much
of a threat politically, as it “had no way of entering into ‘the common train of life,’ preserving
itself from ‘oblivion’” (Taves 1999, 46). This emphasizes the problem James attributed to
religious experience—as something contradicted by life, that has difficulty being borne out in the
world, and attests to a tension between inner and outer experience structuring the idea of
religious experience itself. Within narratives of modernity, as Webb Keane points out, religion in
the 18th and 19th centuries is “confined” to “the private sphere of interior belief, individuals and
the congregations they voluntarily form” (Keane 2007, 84). Thus the “stripping away” of
religions material mediations, such as “bodily disciplines, rituals, icons, even texts” is where
religious purification, in a Protestant vein, “converges with the moral narrative of modernity” (87). This reveals a history that conceptually determines religious experience as an inaccessible, because unmediated, inwardness—making it irrelevant to an outside, whether secular or at least “mainstream” religious, in which it cannot exist/ be realized and thus made to endure.

Spiritualism, however, has its own distinct relation to the antinomies of religious experience, insofar as it tries to suture the modern binarization of the natural and supernatural, understanding spirits as an extension of “natural law” and thus challenging “the dominant tendency to dichotomize religious experience and naturalistic explanation” (Taves 1999,1). For this reason, religious experience in the context of Spiritualism already blurs the line, I want to say, between spiritual experience and mundane sensation, as much as between the emotional or affective sense, and reason. That Spiritualist practices enjoin scientific explanations and religious experience is itself a sign of the secularization of spiritual experience. It is the body of the Medium, as the site of spiritual mediation, where this convergence between secular and religious, “nature” and spirit, meet. For the medium might speak of supersensory “sensations” in her apprehension of spirits, but these seem to begin in honed practices of attending to ordinary, if ephemeral, bodily sensations and “natural” intuitions (as mentioned in Part III). By means of specific techniques of the body mediums attune themselves, as I’ve tried to show, to the movement between thresholds of everyday sensory experience and the discernment of spiritual beings— thus the role of “natural,” or mundane sensation in constituting religious experience, is foregrounded. So here, religious experience is considered a natural extension of our everyday sensations—and not a numinous, otherworldly event. This mundane aspect of spiritual experience is driven home by the alignment of spiritual experience with public demonstrations, making these inner experiences “evidential.” The veil drawn between religious experience and
public visibility is here lifted, *in a very modern way*, as inner images and sensations of spirits are offered up to a quasi-scientific form of verification. In this sense, the Medium’s experience of spirits, assumes into itself, and confronts, a problem shaped by the modern genealogy of religious experience—one that takes for granted an *a priori* gap between inside and outside, and which, it seems to me, informs the particular focus in Mediumstic practices on *translation*, through codes with the spirits, of inner experience into and communicable and verifiable experience. And, as I mentioned in Part III, Mediums do nothing but talk of their experiences—there is not a silence around spiritual experience, but, if anything, an excess of communication.

At the same time, Aurora and Shannon both articulate coming into their mediumship as beginning with a traumatic break, a painful break with the mundane world, where their innermost sensations, as spiritual vision of God, meant leaving the body. Drawn between their body and God, they experienced being caught between – and unable to translate this experience into their everyday life. With their mediumship, however, these experiences become communicable. The excess of communication around spiritual experiences on the one hand, and the sense of a painful break and dissociation between inner experience and world, resonant with James’ portrayal, on the other, speaks to the doubleness of experience in Spiritualism. Spiritualists assume both the role both of “those who have experiences” and “those who explain them,” those who feel God and those who talk about, and analyze, the experience of feeling (Taves 1999). In this way, Spiritualists could be said to take on, mimetically, the role of the secular scientific investigator, psychologist, or philosopher of Enlightenment, whose aim it is to explain the natural causality of religious experience, and thereby to debunk religious experience, or “enthusiasm”—that is, to “explain religion in secular terms.” By “explaining” their own experiences, however, Spiritualist suture the gap between *those who have experience* and *those who explain experience*, and pre-
empt the reduction to “natural causality” by claiming it (Taves 1999, 1).

Far from simply repeating the binary between experience and world, instead of withdrawing religious experience to the chambers of innermost experience, Spiritualism tries to suture this divide in an equally modern way—by “demonstrating” and making “evidential,” inner experience. This is itself an enigmatic exercise of proving the continuity of life beyond death as the demand to make sensible the seemingly supersensible, to communicate the seemingly incommunicable. Spiritualism thus takes up the problem of religious experience, precisely as it is situated in the antinomy between individual and world, focusing as it does on individual experience, which must then be sutured by bringing “evidences” to a public. If Spiritualists stand within the wide wake of Anglo-American formulations of religious experience, it is not surprise that these formulations of experiences, as Bender says, are “productive in shaping,” the way people have, and articulate their experiences (Bender 2001, 9).

As a response to the very a priori split between inside and outside that modernity effects, Spiritualists emphasize sensory experience, foregrounding the body as the site of mediation between inside and outside, spirits and humans. This, I’m arguing, is a way of mediating the divide between isolated experience and tradition, etc., itself an effect of the divide between experiences, practices, affects and doctrines called “religion,” and secular society. Here, religious experience is already figured as a place outside both secular society and religious tradition that must then find itself either within one of these domains to endure—or within a community that itself skirts these limits. I want to say that mediumship makes visible inheritances deeply emplaced within a settler colonial imaginary—namely, the fact of an opposition between visible/invisible, sensation and the supersensory world of spirits, God etc. as requiring the mediation of the body, thus making visible the problem of experience as a problem of bodily
Of interest here, is how a gap is articulated between experience and its account, between the before and after of experience, in the practices of those who cultivate “spiritual experience.” Such a gap arises from within this genealogy of religious experience, as paradigmatic of this very problem: between the isolated, interiority of an experience, and its articulation and _endurance_ in the world. How does this gap, articulated in the initiatory experiences of those becoming Medium? How does modern Spiritualist experience of a broadly universal ‘spirituality’—that can be had through religious experiences, mimic the formulation of modern “religious experience” as articulated by James? In short, how does experience, here, “work”? (Bender 2001)

This modern genealogy of religious experience, as many have shown (Bender 2001; Taves 1999; Luhrmann 2012; Harding 2000) nevertheless produces, as an inheritance of Protestant antinomies, _a particular kind of religious experience_—namely one that does _feel_ as if it takes place in isolation, and one that does reproduce the very problem of how to _convert_ such a experiences to the outside world. Thus, while such experiences _are mediated_ and often cultivated by practitioners within the kinds of spiritual communities I have studied, we must take seriously instances where the apprehension of the spirit world is experienced as a problem of translation, or _conversion_, between inside and outside—precisely because such experiences seem to mark the spaces in which _religious experience_ is most clearly interwoven within the secular fabric of “experience,” making visible experience itself as a problem, conceived within the antinomies between inside and outside, bodily experience and discourse. Recall how Benjamin attested to this secular problem of “experience” as one that opened a gap through which the many repressed spectres of modernity return to haunt the streets, and along with them the revival of dormant
spiritual practices: “astrology and the wisdom of yoga, Christian Science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosis, scholasticism and spiritualism” (Benjamin 1999, 732). So here again it seems the problem of experience is connected to the failure to mourn, to put to rest, the dead and the dead past. Where in secular experience, we might ask, do the dead go? According to Spiritualists, the dead follow the body. Both Shannon and Aurora found that they could neither find a home for their spiritual experiences within their mainstream religious backgrounds, whether catholic and protestant, nor in the secular world in which they tried to work and live normal lives. It was through studying mediumship that they found practices and a community that could receive and narrate their experiences, and I think this has something to do with the way that Spiritualism takes seriously bodily sensations. This makes Spiritualist mediumship a place for such spiritual limit experiences—themselves at the limits of the religious and the secular. In the Mediums I have spent time with, religious experiences are precisely not incommunicable private events, but are themselves partly constituted by a practice of communicating that which seemingly lies beyond communication: the dead. In making visionary and haptic sensations of the spirit world, one of everyday experiences, embedded in communication and practices of evidentiality, the spirits are continuously felt, heard, seen and otherwise sensed as immanent within everyday life. Yet in the initiatory experiences of both Shannon and Aurora, a gap is visible—one reflected in the genealogy of religious experience as something that cannot be easily converted that is translated and expressed, into everyday familial, or even traditional religious publics. Such translations require learned techniques, techniques of the body, through which spiritual transmissions are discerned and communicated (which I will return to in the following section).

Both Shannon and Aurora related a separation from the body, a hovering outside of one’s
body from a height—call it, a place in the *clouds*—and the feeling of pain, regret, guilt and anger in having to return to their earthly bodies. This falling back into the body, which Shannon described as a “decision” made by *them*, or Aurora described as a punishment, a feeling of rejection, seems to express a painful and passive sense of doubt, within this otherwise opening event of an encounter with the divine. After all, both of these women, whom I met as they were well on their way to becoming professional Mediums, describe these experiences as openings onto their mediumistic development, however fraught. And yet, this opening is not a clear path—it takes them both years to find a way to bear out their experience in the world, even if these more extreme experiences were only traumatic moments, ruptures, within a longer narrative of intuitive or spiritual experience. This difficulty of bearing out the vision, in Shannon’s case, is not only painful but difficult to communicate, she searches for something—alcohol—to dull herself, described as years of turning away from what she “knew.” In Aurora’s case, there is the conscious decision to “turn it off,” at least for a time, though her awareness and sensitivity to a spiritual world is always there.

And what of the excess of sensation, involved both in the moment of pain—electrocution or being burned—and the correspondent excess of sensation of the divinity itself, a being with God as a feeling of unconditional love, of being at “home.” These are not ordinary states but extreme states of sensation and emotion, states felt and lived simultaneously as *union* and *separation*—a moment that breaks and forces a new kind of relation between body and world, one that is difficult to bear, and bear–out. *A death in life experience.* And what of the vivid image, in both of these scenes, of a body being drawn in two directions at once—hovering in the clouds, somewhere between heaven and earth, the invisible world of God and of spirit, and the visible world of everyday life? Stuck between two places, how does one tie the gossamer threads
extending from *inner experience* to *outer experience*, particularly when that very experience is of a dramatic separation between the spiritual body and actual body? In these sensations of dissociation, to use a clinical word—states that paint a loose connection between the body and spirit—what is required to bring about that Moebius strip moment, of inside touching outside, these fragile inner atmospheres grown into an “experience” that endures, that can be claimed by others, and repeatedly, claims us?

4.5. The Place of Pain: a Place “obscure and seldom visited”

So says Wittgenstein:

> In order to see that it is conceivable that one person should have pain in another person’s body, one must examine what sorts of facts we call criteria for a pain being in a certain place... Suppose I feel a pain which on the evidence of the pain alone, e.g. with closed eyes, I should call a pain in my left hand. Someone tells me to touch the painful spot with my right hand. I do so and looking around perceive that I am touching my neighbor’s hand... This would be pain felt in another’s body (Das 2007, 40).

I close my eyes, and upon closing my eyes, I touch what I think is the pain in my own hand, but actually turns out to be the pain in the hand of an other. Divesting oneself of sight, just as the moment of divine vision is often accompanied by blindness—as in Caravaggio’s painting of St. Paul fallen into a blinding darkness upon seeing the light of God—divesting oneself of one sense, can heighten the other senses, in particular the haptic sense. What is Wittgenstein on about, in this image of a pain that can’t be located, that seems to defy the enclosure of a body? My pain and the pain of the other—which is which or whose is whose? Do I extend my pain into the body of the “other” when I reach out and find my pain in another’s body, as a kind of projection of pain into a foreign body? Or is my pain always already the pain of the other, in that my pain is never my own, never circumscribable to me or my body, simply? The body is here at once a place of confusion – where is my body if my pain is elsewhere, and a source of discernment – I
use my hands to reach forth to locate the pain that I can’t otherwise place.

The “facts we call criteria for a pain being in a certain place” [italics mine] are by this exercise themselves called into question. I borrow this passage from Veena Das, and am interested in her interpretation of it. Wittgenstein, she says, is performing a “bodying forth of language,” where what passes between bodies in the sentence, “‘I am in pain’ becomes the conduit through which I may move out of the inexpressible privacy and suffocation of my pain” (40). Pain is not a state that marks the impossibility of communication, as Elaine Scarry in her important work has argued (Scarry 1985); if there is an “inexpressibility” of pain it is always set in tension with “my need for its plentitude.” Like Talal Asad, who has argued that pain is not merely a private or “though-destroying” inert state of incommunicability, again in contrast to Scarry’s thesis—“not a private experience but a public relationship” (2003, 81). And Das figures pain as reaching forth, through the body – and here I want to say it is a langue of the body that reaches forth, or language plunged into the “non-thought” of the body, its attitudes, gestures and sensations, as Deleuze has said. If pain reaches forth, outside of myself, it is in search, I am saying, for a second-body in the other, a receiver or interpretant, who could be adequate to what is felt in mine.

Referring again to Cavell, she offers us his interpretation of the passage which doubles her own view: namely that what Wittgenstein seeks to show is that “I am necessarily the owner of my own pain, yet the fact that it is always located in my own body is not necessary” (Das 2007, 41). This seems to point to the sociality of pain—that pain is precisely not private but grounded itself located in “living a relationship” to others (to other bodies with and for whom we suffer). If we are already embedded in relations, within the human and non-human world, how could what I regard as ‘my pain’ ever occur in isolation? The idea that the pain of another is something we
“choose” to take on is one that reflective of secular ideas of what pain is (passive) and thus what agency is. We do not choose to empathize or feel compassion, “to reach out to another’s pain,” but such feelings arise out of the relationships we live (Das 2007, 82). Pain is not passive but agentive, it is not simply a matter of being acted upon, but is often the ground through which other spaces of action in the world are realized. Asad thus points to examples from Christianity and Islam, arguing that these "use pain to create a space for moral action that articulates this world-in-the-next.” Thus Asad argues that pain is also not simply an “experience,” but "creates the conditions of action and experience” because pain is first a “social relationship.”85. If for Wittgenstein, “pain is a public relationship,” Cavell argues, via Das, that this sharing of pain in another’s body, does not “in fact, or literally, happen in our lives,” in that what we experience instead is a “separateness” for which we lack conception. But this is the precise position of the modern problem of “experience” as essentially private – a privacy, or as I think of it, circumscription of bodies that literally divides them from the very sensory extensions that seem always already to be occurring. Mediumship in this sense, makes visible the potentialties of the body’s own sensory extension that exceeds such circumscriptions of the body. For the medium’s body is always already doubled, as I have said, by a second, etheric or astral body—one that can feel the pain of others as it reaches forth. Such a body cannot exist “literally” according to Cavell. For Cavell, the only way to suture the “separation” between bodies is through the “task” of the imagination, which must produce a language for the sense of the other that “marks me” even as “I am not present to it.” This is an ethical call, as it demands an act of “my lending my body to the other’s experience” (Das 2007, 41). But I wonder how seriously we can take this separateness that only “imagination,” itself problematic sequestered to a realm of the mind by modernity, when even here, surely that which marks me, to use Cavell’s language, must
somehow also be in me—even as “I am not present to it.” It seem to me that feeling “my pain in another’s body” is a matter of becoming present to a knowledge that is somehow in us yet remains hidden, like the unconscious of the Body, the Bodily Unconscious as Taussig has developed it (Taussig 2009). Like magic, or sorcery, as Levi-Strauss claimed in his famous essay, The Sorcerer and his Magic, perhaps pain concerns the coming into expression of a knowledge in me that is at the same time unknown to me, at least consciously—which is to say, perhaps it is known to me through a thought, in and of, the body.

If the “place” of pain, and the criteria by which we know that place is much trickier to discern as Wittgenstein’s little exercise shows, this seems like it has a lot to do with the even trickier “place” of the body itself. For the body can sensorially, but also spiritually, extend itself—that is, spectrally, as is the case among the Medium’s I have studied, but also broadly within the realms, both of “magic” and “religion.” And I am here using spectrality to name both sensorial and spiritual forms of extension, because these seem mostly inseparable in the ways Medium’s speak about their practices and in the practices themselves. The body can be shaped, and being shapable—whether understood in terms of “discipline” and “control,” or through spiritual habit and practice, is a thing that appears plastic and thus easily looses, not only its shape but its place. It is to the body, as itself a displaced place, to which the ontology of pain, and thus its mediation, is related. Pain, Asad argues, makes something visible to us—something that otherwise seems to easily recede into the background in the experience of affliction. On the one hand, the experiences of pain as a “symptom of the afflicted body” makes the world recede—for it presents itself as a limit over-against the world: “first of all a limit to the body’s ability to act effectively in the “real world.” On the other hand, it is also “the most immediate sign of this-world, for the senses through which its materiality, external and internal, is felt.”
Paradoxically, the sensation of pain makes the world recede, in that it limits our ability to function in the “real world”—at the same time, it makes visible the inescapable inherence of the material and sensory body in “this-world.” If pain is both an experience of the world as a limit to and of the body, and at the same time the feeling of our most bodilyness—as the fact of the material mediation of the body, as a fact of “this-world”—pain appears as a most liminal thing, an in-betweenness that marks the passage across different thresholds of being. And here, pain shares something with religious experience, for pain, says Asad, is religious: “in the sense of passion, pain is associated with religious subjectivity and often regarded as inimical to reason” (Asad 2003, 67). Yet pain, like religious experience, operates or even calls forth, a secular operation. Asad calls this the peculiar way that pain, as suffering, “offers a kind of vindication of the secular,” insofar, I take it, as the secular claims “this-world”-ness, and pain, in drawing out the fact of our materially mediated existence, “enables the secular idea that “history-making” and “self empowerment” can progressively replace pain by pleasure—or at any rate, by the search for what pleases one (Asad 2003, 68). More generally, because pain, figured as inimical to reason, and as part of the general condition of human suffering, makes operative the secular project of eliminating suffering “universally” (2003, 67).

If we accept the idea that pain is always socially constituted, that is, operates within the space of social relationships—“not a private experience but a public relationship”—then what to make of the moments in which pain, as much as religious experience, appear to arise from a gap between inner and outer experience? I have alluded to the parallelism between the discourse of pain and that of religious experience—particularly in the sense that these are said to be private, unspeakable, and in a sense, prior to, socially mediated experience. What is more, religious experience, like pain, also marks both the limit of the world—that which cannot be
communicated—and the facticity of our material being in this world, insofar as religious experience is embodied, concerns the body and its sensations.

What is so confounding about Aurora and Shannon’s stories is that they knit these correspondences, between pain and experience, together so closely, in word as much as in image. Shannon and Aurora suffered a pain—the pain of electrocution, the pain of being burned—and through those moments of pain—they encountered the divine. The spiritual body of Shannon was elsewhere, it was with God, at the same time that her physical body lay on the ground in her mother’s arms. This very real experience of separation was not without pain. Or rather, the pain came, both in the moment of separation of the body's spectral/spirit extension into an elsewhere, and in the moment of this second-body’s return to the earthly body. They both describe the feeling of separation from the body, as Aurora put it—floating to the ceiling. From this vantage, a *cloud*-vantage, the body appears separate, *down there* in the world, not *up here* with God. Pain is here inseparable from the divine encounter. The idea of floating up, of seeing the limit of the body, in passing through a threshold of pain, is the first part. The second part is the pain of rejoining the body, of being made to return from that place of “unconditional love,” by what Shannon describes as a “decision” not her own—a decision which made her feel that her life is not “her own.” It is in this moment of return, I want to say, that the gap of experience becomes visible. Shannon’s pain arises out of a relation to God, a relation that lives in her for, but one that marks the gap between her innermost sense and the world. Pain it would seem is actually the vehicle for her realization of that relationship, making pain a fundamentally outward reaching thing. The separation that pain brings about is the religious experience—and in this sense, to return to Wittgenstein, both pain and religious experience bring into view an excess of the body—both in its porosity and its boundedness.
What I saw as a paradox in Asad’s formulation, wherein pain points to the limits of this-world, and our embodiedness in it, is here visible in the tension wherein Shannon perceives the limits of the world and of the self—*my life is not my own*—and at the same time, of the unbearable facticity of being in a body. The foregrounding, I am saying, of the limits of the fleshly body, simultaneously opens onto the limitless feeling (an unconditional love) of a spiritual body, raising *a doubt* about the proper place of the body—*a doubt in the body*. Is my body here in the flesh, in the mundane world, or there, with God? I hear Aurora’s words: *I had lived most of my life outside of my body.* And as mediumistic practice asks: where do I sense what I sense—how do I discern where my sensations come from, from the spirits, from imagination? Where does my double body belong, if it is both spiritual and fleshly, spectral and material? All the while, the trouble of bearing out such spiritual encounters in their everyday lives—that feeling that what happened can’t find a place in the world—forces both Medium’s into a deeper awareness of their relation to the material body. The event is borne in the body—even as it draws them out of the body.

Both Shannon’s and Aurora’s narratives engage the familiar antinomies of modern religious experience, or mystical experience, hinted at in phrases like Shannon’s use of the “the dark night of the soul,” and by gap between inner revelation and the problem of giving an account and a social endurance to their experiences. There is also the shared background of having grown up within the Church, in Shannon’s case within a mainstream Protestant denomination, and in Auroras’ case both Catholic and later Pentecostal. And while Aurora mentions that her spiritual intuitions seemed more acceptable in the Catholic context, and she found felt connection to the role of the Madonna in Catholic spirituality, she, like Shannon, would find that neither dominant Christian tradition could account for her spiritual experiences.
fully. There was *no frame, no context*, Shannon said – and of her experience growing up in a Christian she said: *the people who were Christian could never actually have any of the gifts of the spirit*. She found a context only when she entered a *spiritual program* that gave her *spiritual foundation*. Both Aurora and Shannon will find their home in this-world in Spiritualism—both ministers in Spiritual Churches, as well as card carrying Medium’s working in Lily Dale—a place which bears out these initial and traumatic experiences that have shaped what they consider their development as Medium. Mediumship presents itself as a place where their encounters could be received. As such, modern Spiritual mediumship has its finger on, and condition in, a very modern problem: between inner and outer experience, sensation/affect/imagination and reason, as between body and mind. Spiritualism thus presents itself as limit-space for those limit-case experiences that fit neither within religious traditions or secular social space—and gives practitioners a way of finding a language and a space for the visions and spiritual sensations that beset them, one that returns such experiences back to the body itself. In this way, spirit experience mediated by practices attending to the space of the body as a container for the daily immanent apprehension of the spirit world in this world—suturing the gap between spirit and body, between the holy and the mundane. Spiritualism, we might say, attends to the doubt engendered by religious experience—yet, as I will show, re-animates this very doubt by focusing on the evidentiality of that which seems to exceed empirical proofs: the spirit world.

4.6. Spectres of Doubt: Standing on a Point of Mediation
I have often enough asked myself, whether on the whole of philosophy hitherto has not generally been merely an interpretation of the body, and a misunderstanding of the body—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

The Medium stands on “a point” between the edges of past and the future. Or it is better to say, she gives herself a point to stand on, a “horizon” of “unhistory,” as Nietzsche called it, which he described as a delicate “atmosphere” protecting the vitality immanent to life, and to action within life, from the deadening over-determinations of history. Nietzsche seems to have in mind history, as that knowledge by which we remember, and through which we put the past to use in striving toward an ever receding future endeavor, process, progress, which begins to sound an awful lot like the “cruel optimism” Lauren Berlant talks about (Berlant 2011). And while history is good, in that it makes “man become man” through “thinking and reflecting,” and “employing the past for the purposes of life,” too much of a good thing, an “excess of history,” and suddenly there you are paralyzed and unable to act, to “extricate” oneself “form the delicate net of judiciousness and truth for a simple act of will and desire” (Nietzsche, UM, 63). In this sense the Medium is a perplexing figure. For she does not act, at least not in that sense of conquering, crossing and in some very Western way, *making history*. She sits there with her hands in her lap, yet inside of her something is happening. She is moving through many atmospheres, as affective pasts belonging to invisible others.

In giving herself this atmosphere, a little atmosphere of *unhistory*, as a space of forgetting—which also opens up the present, according to Nietzsche, precisely as a space of heightened feeling, like the child’s world in which: “whatever he does perceive […] he perceives as he has never perceived before—all is so palpable, close, highly coloured, resounding, as though he apprehended it with all his senses at once” (Nietzsche 1997, 64). I can’t think of a better way to describe the quickening and intensification of sensation that occurs when one *communicating*
with the spirit world, and the always accompanying sense of being in a foggy cloud in which one is closed off from one’s everyday orientation in the world, as much as from one’s movements in the world: you are in “a different world” within this world (Nietzsche 1997, 64). Nietzsche compares this vaporous atmosphere to the space which encloses you when “seized by a vehement passion for a woman or for a great idea,” there is a blindness in it, as well as a new kind of sight (1997, 64).

In suspending her own biography and those with whom she deals in life, the Medium lives without history—at least when she is in the space of mediumship, of the bodily practices of mediumship. Yet she doesn’t simply forget the past, though she forgets history. A historical phenomenon when it is “completely known” and thus converted into knowledge, presents the past to us as something “dead.” Or as DH Lawrence put it, in relation to the frontiers of American settlement, “once you have conquered a thing, it’s real relation to you collapses” (Lawrence 1971). This death of the past, says Nietzsche, is a recognition of the “delusion, the injustice, the blind passion,” in short the futility “darkening” the “horizon” of every “phenomenon.” (76) Nietzsche echoing the book of Ecclesiastes: there is no new thing under the sun (1:9 KJV).

So history as knowledge, at least too much history, is here named the death of the vitality within events, an affective kernel within what happens to us. The event loses its power over us, and we are freed from its affective web. Yet it is this affective kernel as the life within what happens to us, that Nietzsche directs our attention, this kernel, as something that can live on, after the event itself has passed.

The Medium forgets history yet incorporates the past within herself, as something other than history. In a careful dance, a subtle bodily balancing act, she does not so much forget the
past, as make it return—albeit without history. She makes the past return, not as history but as affective forms and figures, always as present presences. She lives on a point, she encloses within herself a horizon, a space for these returns, yet it is not the enclosure reductively attributed to the animal, as the figure of a mute umwelt that cannot reach beyond itself. In holding the space, containing it within her body, she makes endure the returns of sensations not her own, somehow inside and outside of herself at once. But here the subtle art must be practices, so as not to feel these affective atmospheres too deep, keeping them on the surface lest they lodge themselves in the body, and become deadening once again. Something of the past, not what we call history, lives on, as affecting Shapes, abstractions that somehow retain haptic atmospheres of sensation. For her, there are no dead.

There is a convergence here, in the idea of the abstracted atmosphere, the dislocated worlds we might call spirits, a convergence between image and body, as much as between images and sensory milieus. Spirits are not experienced as flat figures, mere abstractions, or even isolated bodies, but as atmospheres—they carry haptic and hallucinatory scenes with them. Mediumship teaches you to enter into the image. Thinking about the mimetic faculty as involving the “eye as organ of tactility,” Taussig speaks of this entering into images, involving both the copy or image, and “a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived” (Taussig 1993, 21). Benjamin called this the “physiognomic aspect of visual worlds,” worlds he believed were opened by the camera and, as Taussig adds elsewhere, in the child’s world “one’s entire being” enters the image. The child “passes through colored textures and brightly colored partitions” which cover the surface of a book, “to enter a stage on which fairy tales spring to life” (Taussig 2009, 48) These tactile (and colorful) worlds within images are lost to adults, but restored, says Taussig, in the moving-image of the movies.
And this is where the Medium belongs, in this re-entry into the mimetic faculty, where opens onto images like films, if not fairy tales – and they would be more like films, wouldn’t they? For the Medium, I would say, enters what is more like the “adults imagination of the child’s world,” and in any case, as Freud said, all of childhood is a screen-memory, a subtle displacement of the original by layers of memories altered the “Ur” scenes of childhood (Taussig 2009, 48).

After all, Mediumship consists of techniques of the body that bring about this experience, I am saying, of the birth of images in the body; an experience which returns images to tactility through bodily encounter with an outside that becomes an inside. Images, as the iconoclast might warn, have become so abstract to us, they float above us in our media-scape, even as we find ourselves constantly within them—desiring to displace ourselves in them, to find a better script elsewhere than the one we are living. We are inundated with images. They hover above the body, abstracted from the very sensory milieu of the body. Images, like the commodified world they advertise, displace the body in the “swallowing-up of contact […] by its copy” (Taussig 1993, 22). This of course is what gives images, become alienated from us, their particular “animation”—an animation which hides its true source, in the Marxian sense (1993, 22). They do not so much transform us, as paralyze us, or become sound bytes in our mouths, cliché’s stuck in our throats. If images have become idols, places of false hope, false belief, then it has something to do with their abstraction from the body their alienation form the body, or rather from a relation to the body as bodily experience.

So there is something powerful in the iconoclastic gesture, which pushes the problem of mediation to such an (extreme) point, we might say, so as to put in relief the body itself as the center of mediation. For here, as Max Weber said of the Calvinists, and those people of a Puritan past, the individual stands alone before God, is put forward as a kind of isolated figure from
whom all material mediations that might ensure his salvation: “no priest[…] no sacraments […] no Church […] finally, even, no God.” (Weber 2001, 61). And what it takes to subtract all the material mediations—the constant effort of discernment between truth and falsity required to get to this place of terrible “autonomy”, this “unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual”! Nevertheless, that is the ambivalent place of a certain mode of life of the present—if we are to look to our Protestant inheritances, so constitutive of what is called modern life. This subtraction of all material mediations in the production of the lonely isolated individual, makes the individual body the site of all mediation, between the divine and human, but also between ourselves and the object world.

Perhaps I am waxing too dialectical here, but it seems to me that the Medium, standing on this point of the present, reveals something to us. Not because she redeems anything—and certainly not the violence of North American settlement(s). But, insofar as she stands alone in a body—and through her figure, we see the body as the center of mediation, opened onto a world of spectres, not unlike the image Benjamin gave us of the lonely body standing beneath the fleeting clouds, as her most secure ground. As the Puritans realized, through their very suspicion of all material mediations, this left the body, not only as the soul site of material mediation between themselves and God: alone before God—but it drew their attention to the essential displacement, or spectrality, of the body itself. Placing the body at the center had the unwitting effect of revealing the body’s doubleness, its own slippery plasticity, at once spectre and flesh. By this doubleness, the body becomes a source of doubt, something given to displacements—for it can be physically present, yet spectrally absent, it can take on other forms, for the body is understood to be itself an image or figura—a tactile image. The body is a plastic figura, a mimetically shifting Shape (Kibbey 1986), capable of wearing different images—its
ambivalence lies in its being both a divine and a fallen Shape, both image of God, and image of sin, of the many faces of the devil.

The Medium in her stasis, the body of the settler seated in an armchair, upright, hands in her lap, is the picture of a modern whiteness. And yet at moments, she awakes to this plastic power of the body, become a porous sieve, through which the plastic shapes of other bodies exude out of her orifices. Or a cloud forms in front of her face, in a remarkable shifting of the facial structure as it grows into the faces of Others, only to return again to that image of bourgeois stasis, the Medium seated in the armchair. Mostly, however, the body does not change outwardly, outwardly it remains the same, however with the slightest difference, sometimes made in a simple gesture—a hand on the throat, a foreign expression on the face, a song on the lips—revealing the presence of another within. These are intensive leaps, leaps while standing still, all the while inside, spectral worlds unfold and flit by in a succession of images and sensations.

Here, the “many” are neither demons nor gods, but people—people dead yet alive, who impress themselves upon the bodies of the living. But it is her performance of the centrality of the body, as the site of mediation, the Medium of all media, that makes the Spiritualist Medium an inheritor of this iconoclastic symptomatology—and thus very modern. Even her inner spiritual experiences are shaped and structured according to the modern antinomies between inside and outside, the inner place of feeling and the outer place of communication, bodily sensation and public reason. And tracing the concept of religious experience, we see the place of experience repeatedly pushed to the inner place of private “authentic” experience, and unconscious bodily sense/sensation, in antithesis to either a more reasonable public religion, or
secular life. Spiritualism, in making *experience* itself central to their movement, as centered upon giving *demonstrations of evidences*, both acknowledges this divide, and tries to suture it.

**Techniques of the Body and Abstraction**

Mauss, in thinking about the body as the primary site of mediation of the social, held that we might perceive, in the most unconscious bodily practices, how the social gets into the body: the “social is projected on the individual […] down to the deepest layer of conventions and modes of behavior” (Levi-Strauss 1987). And, according to Levi-Strauss’ reading of Mauss’ theory, such an understanding of the body “would produce an unexpected wealth of information about migrations, cultural contacts and borrowings made in the distant past,” for while such “evidences” are found “by archaeological excavations or figured monuments” they are “also, and often much better,” found in the “seemingly insignificant gestures transmitted from one generation to the next and protected by their very insignificance” (Levi-Strauss 1987, 9).

Understanding the body here means understanding the way pasts get into the body, and understanding the past as a residual mode of the present. Looking for signs of the past in the insignificant and overlooked, sounds an awful lot like the practice of mediumship. And maybe here, my reading the spirit of settlement through the bodily practices of those who traffic in spirits, isn’t so strange when you consider that Mauss, according to Levi-Strauss anyway, “liked to discern the frontiers of Celtic expansion in the shape of bread in bakery windows” (Levi-Strauss 1987, 9). If spectres live on the surface, as Deleuze and Foucault said of the phantasm, then perhaps it is a study of spectres that returns us to the plasticity of the body, its ability become an image of our “techniques” and “representations” (Levi-Strauss 1987, 9).
What is at stake is how we understand abstraction. Attention to bodily gestures, and ephemeral sensations is an act of inverting, I want to say, the *place* of abstraction. It is not that abstraction is bad, or necessarily ideological, but that it often becomes a forgetting of the bodily conditions that produced the abstraction. And this is when abstraction ossifies into static forms. To think the dynamism of forms, the affectivity of abstraction, is to draw a visceral outline—to give that minimal abstraction necessary for creation.

Forms that appear, irrespective of any content, any material insides—appear empty, and thus more conducive to the project of universalization. But even such *cleared* and emptied forms are far from empty, they hide within themselves not only diagrams, vectors of potentiality, but affective constellations. When the spirit appears as a static figure, repeated into abstraction and generalization—as in the spectral Indian—such appearances are like the ossified after-thoughts or clichés. Such general figures are too far removed from the actual inner experience of sensing the spirits, in which spirits first make their appearance as affective milieus, or atmospheres as I have called them—tactile films unfolding within a body. They are forms or images that seem to carry tiny affective worlds inside of them. In Haitian Vodoun, for example, the ancestor spirit or *loa*, despite the fact that these are generalized figures, embodying “principles”, demand and manifest such milieus when they appear in the bodies of the ritually possessed. One of the main instantiations of the “female principle” among the *loa* is Erzulie, the “tragic mistress.” To her belongs an “atmosphere of infinite luxury, a perfume of refinement” arranged carefully with meticulous decoration whenever her arrival is awaited. Setting the stage for Erzulie thus involves the careful furnishing of certain accoutrements. For instance, the “elaborate toilette”—which she performs “as her first act”—requires an “enamel basin in which she washes” (and this basin can be “neither chipped nor discolored”), new soap, several “probably embroidered” towels, “a
special comb,” perfumes and powder. She is also given a “white or rose dress of delicate cloth, with lace embroidery” and many gold and pearl necklaces (Deren 1953, 139). In this way, the abstracted figure figuring the “female principle,” in life—a generalized image—is given a tactile milieu, a little life world unto herself, in which to become real once again.

Far from empty universals, I am arguing, all forms hide some affective relation, which is forgotten—a forgetting of the body, as well as a displacement of the body, as that which stands at the center of spiritual and conceptual mediation. I want to say that form itself is affective, that there is an “empathetic” ground of knowledge, of concepts. Thinking the relation between abstractions and affections through an attention to specific techniques of the body is a way of addressing how ideas, but also the “social,” get into the body—how these enter the non-thought of the body, and shape us at a most intimate level. Far from the opposite of abstraction, the body is here revealed as the condition of abstraction.

**Spirit as Fold: A Conversion of Far and Near**

The spirit is a space and a form, the space and form of the fold between outside and inside.

“Forces always come from the outside, the outside that is further away than any “exteriority”” (Deleuze 1988b, 122). The spirits are not the exterior of the body, that is, of the Medium’s body, but are, in this sense, related to an outside distant from the inside, except through this process of folding. Deleuze refers to this hollowing out of an inner space as itself a *conversion* — the “conversion of far and near”—which constructs an “inside-space that will be completely co-present with the outside-space on the line of the fold” (Deleuze 1988b, 118). And this “line” that is folded, refers to an outside of forces not yet situated in bodies or “speaking persons”; rather, we are in the shady domain “of uncertain doubles and partial deaths where things continually
emerge and fade” (1988b, 121). Forces, which summon forth the past and the future into the present — memory cannot account for this re-presencing of forces as “fold” of the present, as Memory concerns “old perceptions.” It is not a matter of “commemorating the past,” but of forming a “bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves […]” (Deleuze 1988b, 167). Art is not memory or commemoration but fabulation (Deleuze 1994, 171), to return to Taussig’s words: “something new […] from the charged juxtaposition of present with past” (1999, 134).

You take a ribbon and create a loop, a fold in the material. The outer surface of the ribbon now creates an inner fold, where the two sides touch one another: the Moebius strip. The spirit as it takes form and becomes ‘visible’ for us, may be likened to what Deleuze calls auto-affection (Deleuze 1988b, 118; Brikema 2014, 23). Affections achieve an autonomy as ‘auto-affections,’ insofar as they constitute a fold of outside and inside, that refers only to itself — affects create a space of their own. In mediumship, I am suggesting, this involves the creation of a second-space within the body that may be exuded in spiritual forms, either material or imagistic. Material, in the sense of ectoplasm — as that hazy cloud-like matter transfiguring William’s face as imagistic descriptions (messages) given by the medium to a “sitter.” The spirit is then not merely the extension of an inside to an outside (the expression of the repressed or of feeling etc.) but the fold of the outside — forces from afar — as these encounter or relate to the forces, inside, “near” the bodies that sense them, a folding of far and near, outside and inside.

Of course, Deleuze has in mind the outside of thought, what he calls non-thought, which he locates in the “stupidity of the body, its tiredness and waiting” (Deleuze 2001). But why not take this further, that is, to spirits and the bodies that make room for spirits? The “sensitivity” of the Medium, in her self-description as an instrument finely tuned to the vibrations of the spirit
world, makes of her body a second-space for the folding of forces upon one another. She creates a correspondence with the impersonal outside of images and the personal inside of bodily sensations, that together form moving-pictures, theater-like milieus condensed in the medium’s body where these give rise to independent forms, sensible forms (spirits).

The spectral facial forms appearing on the screen-head of the medium, are here, to my mind, likened less to individual memory expressions, or emotions, and more to de-subjectivized expressions of autonomous forms (forms that auto-affect themselves) (Deleuze, Guattari 1994). Perhaps here, in the spirit-images that cross the face of the Medium from the “other side” of life, the dead are given a means of material endurance — for a brief moment, asserting their autonomy, in the fleeting ectoplasmic image of the face. This allows us to think the iconicity of the spectral image, not so much as a transcendent image (imago dei) transfiguring the earthly vessel (incarnation), but as an immanent icon that breaks with the analogy to the One, and gives rise to many images, the fold of profane encounters between bodies, actual and virtual, fleshly and spectral.

These sensory spirit figures fold the abstract and the sensory, I want to say, insofar as they act both as figural forms, and, on the other side, affections and sensations. Brinkema, in her book The Form of the Affects, wants to depart from the de-formalization of ‘affects’ when these are referred back to the feelings of subjects, the expression of bodies. Referring to the famous “tear” on the face of Marion after the shower scene in Hitchcock’s Psycho, Brinkema says “it is an empty frame, not essentially or necessarily attached to bodies or to emotions or even to meaning” but a “visible shape on the face.” This freeing of the form of the tear from affect as subjective expression, frees up affects to be thought as already-forms, delinked and surpassing “emotion, from expression, from interiority, from subjects — even from life and vitality”
Here affects are impermanent affective “structures” that open up the possibility of what she calls “affectivizing form itself,” which breaks with the opposition between subject and object, dependent upon our “dominant Western philosophical models for thinking about interior states or the passionate movement of subjects.” Brinkema is following Deleuze’s idea of the autonomy of perceptions and affections. In What is Philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari argue that “art” consists of freeing the percept and affect from the states of affairs in which they arise (context), as well as the subjects who feels and sees: “sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived” (1994, 164). For percepts and affects to become autonomous from either “states of affairs,” or the “subjects” that feel, see, or sense, they have to be given an enduring form, as in art where sensations are made endure in some medium, some material which then stands as a “monument” to these “blocs of sensation”.

Thinking forms as affective, affective forms, argues Brinkema, takes us beyond the “true” or “false” tear, authentic or inauthentic, “Plato’s choice.” Here the tear would refer to those forces of an outside that exceed the binary between true and false, authentic and inauthentic expression, allowing us to view the tear “that is not legible as a tear.” Such illegibility does not make the tear reducible to “passive brute mute matter,” rather, the illegibility of the tear makes it “an opening, a possibility for reading for something beyond (or that resists, even that obscures) its own self-evidence” (Brinkema 2014, 21). Obscuring its own self-evidence, and thereby making visible an “empirical excess,” I would say, affecting forms trouble the opposition between what can appear and what remains hidden, as something that appears without exhausting itself in recognition, yet has a lingering affect upon us. She thus reads the tear as an ecto-affect, a visible form expressing the affective exteriority of emotion,
sensation, and image, as well as the formal affectivity of “shape, structure, duration, line, light” (Brinkema 2014).

What of the ecto-affect of ectoplasmic forms become faces in Mediumistic transfiguration? The faces that pass before William’s head are not, in this sense, expressions of William’s subjective emotions, feelings or sensations, but the fold between an outside of impersonal forces, and the inside of subjective states, where William’s own sensations and affections meet that which exceeds him. The folding of inside and outside is productive of forms—these recognizable faces, or bodily shapes, in short, spirits—that are thus both, and maybe always undecidably, of the body sensing them, and exceed the body sensing them. And for that matter, the inner forms as affecting images of spirit films that flit by within the Medium, are also irreducible to subjective states.

However, I depart from Brinkema’s reading of affective forms, insofar as she deems it necessary, in order to liberate affects as forms, to not only “shed the subject,” but to shed the affects of “bodies.” Here she reads Deleuze’ as insisting upon “the role of bodies in thinking affectivity after the subject” from which she wishes to depart as she wishes to think affects themselves as forms (Brikema 2014, 25). This insistence on ‘the body’ in Deleuze’s work, however, serves a particular purpose — I would argue — namely, to open up the immanence of body with, not only the forms of thought, but the forms of time, what he calls “thought in the body,” as well as “time in the body.” This makes the body itself both the place of immanently abstract “forms” and de-subjectified forces—never merely material, actual, organic, phenomenal, fleshly—but always doubled by the spectral as: vectors of force, form of sensation, fold of inorganic forces, body without organs (BWO). Thus to return to the problem of the body, as this work tries to show, is to make visible the problem of the body in its relation to spectral
forms (or, Shape): how the body forms and deforms itself, giving rise to affective abstractions or affecting forms, as an encounter with the “incorporeal events,” as forces and sensations that pass through a body.

The forms that affects take, their structural autonomy from subjective feelings and sensations is crucial to thinking the way “the interiority of emotion” is an “operation of the outside, as the exteriority of visible form.” This double movement which Brinkema has called the “formalization of affect” and the “affectivizing of forms,” reveals how affects, I am saying, make up spaces, understood both as internal folds of the body—a second-body that opens onto dream-worlds, inner theaters or milieus of sensation, and as external forms, “clear contours, and shapes” that give themselves over to visibility and thus questions of endurance. These shapes, themselves bodies, externalized forms of spirits that come to us through the medium of the Medium’s body. The formal exteriority of affects — even when these appear within the inner space of the body— means that affects not only contain formal structures (time, light, space etc.) but also that they are intensive expressions of external social forms (including the ‘idea’ of a person as a dynamic form or spirit).

4.8. E.B. Tylor at a Séance

In 1872, not long after the beginnings of modern Spiritualism at Hydesville in 1848, the renowned English anthropologist E.B. Tylor, coiner of the term “animism,” in his tome Primitive Culture, to describe the “belief in Spiritual beings” of so-called primitive peoples as a “minimum definition of religion,” attended a number of Spiritualist séances in London (Stocking 1971). Actually, Tylor attends not just any séances, but a few conducted by then famous Mediums, still claimed today as the best of the best of mediumship—notably D.D. Home, a medium known for
levitating himself out of an open window on one occasion, and returning in an adjacent room, and the “first” medium, Kate Fox, the little girl from that small rural house in Hydesville who is credited with the epochal opening of modern spirit communication, by creating a “code” through “rapps.”

In any case, “there is evidence to suggest,” says George Stocking,” that E.B. Tylor’s concept of animism, developed between 1866-1869, grew out of his “awareness” of 19th century Spiritualism (1971, 89). He clearly viewed modern Spiritualism as a “survival,” to use his concept of the anachronistic remains of certain animist forms of belief, even as the beliefs themselves were no longer alive: “modern spiritualism, as every ethnographer may know, is pure and simple savagery both in its theory and the tricks by which it is supported” (Stocking 1971, 90). Tylor’s theory of survivals depends upon the very idea of a modern persistence of “savage thought” which he supported with an “ethnography of spiritualism’ that looked at “specific manifestations—rapping, spirit writing, DD Home’s levitations, and the “unbinding trick” of the Davenport brothers,” each case serving as an analogue to “savage tribes” and “earlier periods of European history” (Stocking 1971, 90). Even if one were to take the philosophy and spirit evidences of modern Spiritualism as true, “it would still be true,” Tylor argued, that “modern spiritualism is a survival and a revival of savage thought, which the general tendency of civilization and science has been to discard” (Stocking 1971, 90). Pointing to what Keane says about the “paradigm of modernity” as realized in “a secular Europe” that relegates “those for whom the gods are still agents in or beyond this world,” not only to “difference but, in historical terms, to anachronism” (Keane 2007, 92).

The 18th and 19th centuries mark the reduction of religion to a private sphere within “culture” at large, but also to the confined space of “interior belief,” the focus on belief itself
being an effect of Protestant reformist concepts (Keane 2007). Emphasizing belief over external mediations, religious space is purified of “bodily disciplines, rituals, icons, event texts,” and this “stripping away” as an act of purification “converges with the moral narrative of modernity,” as Keane argues. Religion is thus split between belief on the one hand, and material/ritual mediations on the other, meaning and form. The “true” form of religion, within this Protestant narrative, is realized in concepts within the mind, or, for a believer, within the soul. An abstraction and interiorization of religion, Protestant iconoclastic suspicions around material mediation, has the effect of othering material mediations as such, as Keane seems to argue. Against this background of a “dematerialized” and thus “purified” space, the material mediations of non-Protestant religious rituals appear as merely particular accidents, to “true” inward, and thus universal religion. And this, says Keane, is where religion, “made primarily into a matter of concepts […] converges with the idea of disenchantment as definitive of secular modernity” (Keane 2007, 111). This is primarily because religion, as a matter of concepts, may be measured against the concepts of science, which taken to be of “better reasoning and more realistic ideas,” leads to a disenchantment with religion—to its “diminishment” (Keane 2007,111). I want to add simply, that such disenchantment does not only occur in the conceptual adequation of religion to science, but in a prior disenchantment inherent to iconoclastic thought—for if nature is full of dangerous or at best, ambivalent Shapes that threaten our imitation of God as imago dei, this seems to engender the very desire to purify ourselves of material mediations as locus of mediation between ourselves and God. Not to mention, requiring a constant vigilance regarding the discernment of true and false forms of mediation.

Within this narrative of a Protestant modernity, Keane can argue that for E.B. Tylor “religious practices” are “above all, outward expressions of inner beliefs” (Keane 2007, 96).
Belief always being the more essential, in relation to which material practices are merely accidental. This undergirds Tylor’s theory of “survivals,” for it is operative within an ontology that separates material forms from content or meaning, so where the “beliefs may vanish” the form of the belief, as in religious rituals and practices may be left “behind as survivals” (Keane 2007, 96). The seperability of practice and belief, form and meaning, meant Tylor could claim that “savage” forms or practices sur*vi*ve into the present, even as the beliefs have lost their meaning, at least in relation to the civilized world.

The difference called “animism,” which Tylor aligned with the life-worlds of primitive peoples, and originally considered calling “fetishism,” according to Stocking, concerns where people accord agency. The animist accords a special agency to inanimate objects, or nature, misplacing, and thus misunderstanding, the proper place of agency. The place for this difference called animism, then falls outside of modernity, relegated to the past. A past, however, which is presupposed as sharing an ontology with the modern, such that what survives is an outside also inside modernity. Thus the very idea of the “survival” of religious forms requires that such differences, as those between “savage” and modern thought, occur within a shared ontological background. The idea being that behind the particular differences between cultures, as between primitive and modern, there lies a shared objective world. This is a necessary presupposition of Enlightenment, and thus a world governed by reason: “all humans share an objective world since it is only against objective conditions that rationality can be determined” (Keane 2007, 100).

Hence, the now obvious point, that the designation of certain peoples and beliefs as less rational, less developed, can only occur against the backdrop of a world in which reason is presupposed. Tylor’s concept of animism,” argues Keane, assumes a shared “objective world” as the background from which the reason of primitives and missionaries alike are measured. “A
universal background of “human nature,” subject to “natural law,” conditions Tylor’s conception of animist difference, and the survival of this difference (Keane 2007, 96). Natural law, as for the Spiritualists, meant that we could assume “intelligibility” in nature—what this meant for Tylor’s theory of religion, was that any cultural phenomena was subject to the criteria of “intelligible motives, that is, reasons that we ourselves ought to be able to supply.” Granting intelligibility to religion, even primitive religion, meant that animism, as a “product of rational thought,” was also subject to rational critique in the name of progress (Keane 2007, 94). But this conception of difference is a refusal of difference, for it cannot think difference beyond an ontology of shared “being,” subject to secular Enlightenment ideas of “intelligibility.” The difference of those who believe in spirits is thus sequestered to the past within a progressive history, a modern Western ontology of time, itself a machine of purification.

The emphasis of Spiritualists on “natural law,” guided by an “infinite intelligence,” which makes the spirits themselves intelligible communicators from the beyond, coincides here with Victorian ideas of evolutionary progress. Yet Spiritualism, contra Tylor, understands itself not as a “survival” of primitive thought, but an advancement of primitive thought, one that enfolds the improvements of civilized peoples—scientific principles of “evidence” and modern technologies—into belief in the spirits. It is this claim to modernity on the part of the Spiritualists, Stocking seems to argue, that makes Spiritualism anathema to Tylor’s belief in science—a science that should supersede such forms of belief. This makes the “phenomena of spiritualism […] the agent of doubt rather than of reassurance,” as to any possible harmony between science and religion. The idea of a scientific law that could “include spiritual phenomena,” even as Tylor entertained the idea that “psychic force” could be at work in certain physical manifestations he witnessed at séances, did not “comfortably” fit “into the framework of
a ‘positive science’ which Tylor was inclined to equate with ‘materialism’” (Stocking 1971, 103).

Keane calls Tylor a “purifier,” for his insistence on progress which understands the task of ethnography to be one of “expos[ing] the remains of crude old culture which [has] […] passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction,” and for his understanding of the “science of culture […]” as “essentially a reformers science” (Keane 2007, 95). Tylor’s concept of survivals thus purifies the present, of living or animate difference by measuring that difference against the same horizon of progressive reform and rational intelligibility. The idea that animism is intelligible, rational etc. both imbues it with “commonality,” that missionaries can develop and seek out, while understanding such commonality as means for a project of bringing up the “primitive” to the “level of other civilizations” (Keane 2007, 97). So within Tylor’s Victorian anthropology, it seems, difference is meted out not between cultures, but between stages of culture. What I mean is, the civilized present is here purified of the animate presence of living religion—those who accord agency to the other than human world—which are reduced to “survivals,” forms that have lost “their original rationale,” within the present stage of civilization.

If radical and thus reformist Protestantism in effect “dematerializes” religion, as Keane says, making “religion primarily into a matter of concepts,” then religion becomes a matter of “cognitive difference,” which “in effect historicizes religion”—where some beliefs belong to the present while others do not (2007, 111). This makes some religions “dead” religions, I would add, recalling Calvin’s iconoclastic idea that if you historicize the image it will be safe, and not idolatrous, a “dead” image instead of a “living” image. Tylor’s concept of “survivals” thus belies a distinction between form and content that reinforces a “Protestant semiotic ideology,” which distinguishes between “ritual (empty forms that have survived,” from the “meanings they have
What then, to make of Stocking’s claims that Tylor’s concept of animism may have been influenced by his rather short dally into the séance parlors of his contemporaries? Empirically at least, Tylor drew “on the observed behavior of children, as well as his own extensive ethnographic readings” (Stocking 1971, 91). Children being the place where an adult modernity likes to keep its “savage” analogue, the child figured as a developmental stage on the way to adulthood, as echoed in contemporary cultures desire to free your inner child, or heal your inner child, and the like. This, of course, assumes the child is best understood as a stage on the path to adulthood and not ontologically expressing a difference that cannot be measured against the adult human. In any case, I want to say that the evolution as progress model is here projected both onto children and savages alike. Tylor’s interest in the survival of primitive thought in children and his interest in Spiritualism seem to be linked insofar as Spiritualism “provided a major source of the empirical data in terms of which the concept [survivals] was developed,” as Stocking notes of Tylor’s essay, “On the survival of savage thought” (1971, 91).

In the diaries, terse notes jotted down during his ten or so participations in séance circles, Tylor moves from a certain disbelief in the manifestations of the Mediums, to uncertainty, according to Stocking.

If one surveys the whole November sequence of séances, there is a distinct movement from active disbelief to perplexed uncertainty: Mrs. Holmes was a “shameful and shameless” impostor; Mrs. Olive a cocky, if hysterical, dodger […] but with Mrs. Bassett, Tylor moved toward uncertainty; Kate Fox left him explicitly ‘puzzled’; and with Moses, although commenting on occasional fraud, he was left ‘in wonder at [his] spiritual gifts’ [italics mine] (Stocking 1971, 101).

Remarkable in his apparent shift toward uncertainty regarding the reality of these psychic and spirit manifestations, it seems to Stocking, is that it has little to do with his assessment of the
“evidences”—whether of messages, or the feats of physical mediumship, which he readily finds explanations for. “Tylor was able actually to ‘explain’ about as much at the end of the diary as he was in the beginning,” says Stocking, that is, Tylor explained away what he saw as so much trickery. Yet toward the end of the diary, around his encounter with Kate Fox and the “rappings” she manifested, Tylor begins to doubt his certainty that all was fraud—“he was left feeling for the first time” that he had experienced something really out of the ordinary.” And this, despite the fact that he was able to offer more in the way of “explanation” for Kate Fox’s rappings than he had for DD Home, whom he dismissed outright (Stocking 1971, 101). Stocking also notes the disparity between Tylor’s public and private writings on Spiritualism—the public writings are far more critical than his private conclusions in the diary. “The most” Tylor is prepared to credit modern Spiritualism in his official writings is as “delusional belief in the reality of their own performances, combined with the possibility […] that they might possess a mesmeric faculty which could delude other people into fancying that they perceive monstrous unrealities (Stocking 1971, 91).” For Tylor, a Medium then, is one who holds the delusional belief that they can delude other people.

Stocking proposes a few theories, including that Tylor was impressed not by the difference in evidences, but by the status of the witnesses in the latter cases—and that this speaks to his theory of survivals, tracing “the contemporary locus of […] early animistic belief” to “the lower classes.” Here Stocking directs us to Tylor’s “deprecating remarks” as to the “appearance, the character, and the style of mediums, almost all of whom were of American or English lower class origin.” To this point, one Medium, Lottie Fowler, was described as “a pasty-faced, long-nosed ugly creature, and “Miss Hudson” as “a coarse-dark-browed impostor,” and the spirits themselves, as “racial and social inferiors” who “spoke in dialects and said stupid things,” seem
easy to dismiss, enough reason “for disbelieving them.” However, I think this last remark does not hold exactly, for Tylor seems more offended by the *inauthentic* performance of these spirits, noting of an Irish spirit that she “talked rubbish about Fenians in brogue,” that in many moments during her speech, her *brogue* accent failed her in her pronunciation of certain words (Stocking 1971, 94). This especially comes out when he mentions the appearance of an Indian spirit, Rosie, who happens also to tell Tylor that he is also a Medium: she “declared she saw light about my face and [that] I was highly mediumistic” (Stocking 1971, 94). However, Tylor tested “Rosie” who “talked what she called Ojibwy Indian and I call gibberish” asking her the “word for stone [.] which was nothing like the real word” (Stocking 1971, 94). His verdict, that it is all “imposture”—“the most shameful and shameless I ever came across,” doesn’t seem to me merely to arise from class disdain. Tylor’s charge of imposture and “legerdemain,” has more to do with the puzzling separation between the outward experience of failed “evidences” (as explainable) at the séances he attended, and a seeming inner sense of uncertainty. What he encountered sounds utterly familiar of the séances of physical mediumship I have attended. One is struck by how “fake” it all seems, and yet, how sincere in their belief many of the practitioners are. But mostly, you encountered a complicated disbelief amidst belief, where practitioners point out aspects of the performance that seemed “fake,” while affirming their greater belief in spiritual manifestations. The diary also shows this—referring to the medium Moses, Tylor notes: “he declares that three times he has been raised into the air, once his chair rising & dropping from him. He seems to consider the phenomena possible & in a general way true, though often simulated.” While two other attendees of a séance Tylor spoke with, a Mrs. Jaquet & Mrs. Edwards, “were utterly convinced (while retaining their faith in the manifestations of mediums under the other circumstances) that this particular medium had been fraudulently assisting
nature” (Stocking 1971, 100). There is a faith that spirits in general manifest, and yet a skepticism as to this or that particular manifestation: “in a general way true, though often simulated.” What is this admission of simulation within a greater faith in spiritual manifestations, especially when those manifestations believed in are not the one’s here, now, immediately occurring in front of you? Why is belief, in other words, always seemingly displaced?

Tylor’s reaction to the Indian spirit Rosie, puts in relief his role as anthropologist, and seems makes him more of an arbiter of poor imitations. Tylor can, after all, measure the “evidence” of her Indian “gibberish” against his knowledge of the Ojibwa language. But what is perhaps most offensive to Tylor, if I can guess at this a little, is not only that these are poor performances, but that they are executed far too close to home for comfort, where “playing Indian” poorly, risks calling into question the discernment of “authentic savagery” upon which Tylor’s idea of survivals depends. Casting himself in the role of “man of science,” Tylor mentions an argument with a Spiritualist at a séance, whom he asked about the ridiculous similarity in appearance between the Medium and her spirit figure or apparition: But “you know that the hands & arms & dresses that the spirits materialize are so like the ordinary ones, that it’s impossible to distinguish them” said the man to Tylor. Tylor responds in disbelief: “but, said I, the arm came out from the woman’s shoulder to touch me! “Yes” he said, “you scientific men must of course give such natural explanation as seems sufficient to you, but we know etc. etc.” (Stocking 1971, 98). This convenient explanation on the part of the Medium, is an offense both to Tylor’s own sense experience—he saw the arm emerge from the Medium’s shoulder! A spirit arm resembling too closely her own arm—and to his intelligence—marked by the Spiritualists’ response: well you are a “scientific man,” with only “natural” explanations, so you wouldn't get it!
The play of certainty and doubt seems inseparable from the opposition between external evidences and internal experience, and for that matter, external forms and internal meanings or beliefs. Tylor’s attendance of the 1872 séances in London were concurrent with a shift, notes Stocking, in English mediumship toward “the first ‘materializations’ of visible, palpable, spirit figures” (1971, 91). This strikes me as important, for the physical manifestations of spirits, in the form of spirit figures, is considered the most “evidential” kind of mediumship addressing itself directly to the objective observation of witnesses, whose subjective state is a matter of indifference to such evidences. And for that very reason, such physical manifestations were always subject to the greatest fraud.

The offense, for Tylor, lies in the gap between what his senses tell him, and what the Mediums claim. And such physical mediumship—like ectoplasmic arms growing out of bodies—precisely, in offering itself up as objective evidence, seems to encourage this form of skepticism: it both claims to prove itself to sense experience, and thus to “natural explanation,” while what it seeks to prove—the spirits—exceeds “natural explanation.”

Physical mediumship lays claim to direct observation—addressing itself to an objective sense experience of witnesses, no matter what their belief or “faith” in the matter of spirits. Yet in practice, no act of mediumship involves this easy bifurcation between objective phenomena and the inner states of those involved, not least because mediumship depends upon energetic and affective “chains of sympathy,” to use Cox’s term, between bodies. Again and again sitters at a séance are reminded to “raise the energy” by singing or otherwise focusing their energy and to make themselves “open” to the spirit, as this will aid the medium. Or poor phenomena at a séance, or a less than evidential mediumistic reading, may be explained by the practitioner (sometimes conveniently) as due to “bad energy” in the room, or on the part of the participants.
What I wish to draw out, however, is the gap between Tylor’s reaction to the “evidences” of mediumship, including those of physical mediumship, and his movement toward an inner uncertainty. His concluding remarks in the diary are: “my judgment is in abeyance. I admit a prima facie case on evidence, & will not deny that there may be a psychic force causing raps, movements, levitations [,] etc. But it has not proved itself by evidence of my senses, and I distinctly think the case weaker than written documents let me to think” [italics mine] (Stocking 1971, 100). If Tylor’s sense experience does not prove to him that these “may” be “psychic forces,” where does this shift lie? Interestingly, the last line of Stocking’s excerpt of the diary is a play on the biblical line, “blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believe,” to which Tylor adds, “Seeing had not (to me) been believing & I propose a new text to define faith [:] “blessed are they that have seen, and yet have believed” (Stoking 1971, 100; John 20:29).

Everything Tylor sees at the séance, everything he sees that is proximate, occurring in front of his eyes, makes him disbelieve the spirits, and yet this seems to open him onto an experience of feeling something, uncertainty, wherein at least his certainty (that it is all a sham) is called into question. It is as if what lies directly in front of us, what presents itself visibly to the senses, elicits far more doubt than that which we perceive (and feel) only vaguely and at a distance. If only one can believe, despite having seen the tricks…

This confusion of outward evidence and states of feeling, energies etc. comes to the fore in the diary itself, when Tylor’ is told by the medium Moses that his “presence was injurious” to the séance and that when he left the room for a while, “more moving & noise had happened than the whole time of my presence” (Stocking 1971, 100). This was curiously explained by the Medium as due to Tylor himself being a “powerful but undeveloped medium,” who was “absorbing all the force” needed for the manifestations (Stocking 1971, 100). And to Moses
Tylor is sympathetically disposed in the diary, calling him a gentleman and noting that he takes “no money,” and that “his trance seemed real.” Thus after the Medium goes into a trance, Tylor admits, “I myself became drowsy & seemed to the others about to go off likewise,” to which he adds the enigmatic remark:

> to myself I seemed partly under a drowsy influence, and *partly consciously shamming*, a curious state of mind which I have felt before & which is very likely the incipient stage of hysterical simulation. It was a kind of tendency *to affect more than I actually felt* [italics mine] (Stocking 1971, 100).

Tylor implicates himself, not only in falling into a trance-like state, *like a medium*, but then of “hysterical simulation,” and this on the heels of having determined, in a number of passages in the diary noted by Stocking, the mediums he encounters to be “hysteric.s.”

Of the medium Mrs. Olive he says: “I agreed that she might have really been in a kind of mesmeric trance and might believe in her own foolish imaginations […] her way was indeed rather [more] like self-delusion that mere fraud […]We could see where all her poor little notions came from; […] the acting of her different characters was superficial, without any insight, and in voice and language pitiable attempts […] except the little girl [,]” (Stocking 1971, 95) His verdict “subjectivity[,] hysteria [,] & the poorest cockiest [?] dodging and fortunetelling” (1971, 95). In another example he refers to Kate Fox as “a little nervous woman” whom everyone troubles to keep calm for “a little sets her flighty excitable, hysterical little mind wrong”(1971, 98) Finally, he seems in agreement with his friend Mr. Wilson’s conclusion that “all mediums are hysterics,” who are masters at the simulation of ailments, and that “a hysterical simulator is a match for any odds except long observation & lucky chance” (1971, 99). Yet this conclusion, is immediately followed in the text by Tylor’s comment as to how “curious” he finds Kate Fox, “her feats [are] puzzling to me […] ‘Last night for the first time I saw & heard what deserves
Further looking into if I can get the chance”’ (1971, 99).

If “all mediums are hysterics” and master simulators, they are also for this very reason, caught up in their own simulations. She is a simulator, but one in whom the inner idea and outer performance cannot be separated. She believes in her silly fancies, her delusions—even as she is shamming. But isn’t Tylor here the biggest sham, even shamming at being a man, in his own becoming-hysteric? Is he wearing invisible drag, wondering secretly at his own hysteria whilst describing the female Medium-hysterics he encounters as possessed of foolish imaginations, hysterical little minds, not to mention, self-delusional, nervous, flighty, excitable etc.? Especially when, it seems to me, believing in her shams a little too much makes the Medium a good performer—for it is all fine and good for a Medium to doubt others of fraud, as long as in the moment of her mediumship, she does not doubt herself. Yet in Tylor’s estimation this very belief makes her delusional and disqualifies her as a simulating hyster. So what of Tylor’s claiming himself a hysteric, suspecting himself of consciously shamming, affecting more than he feels—and this, in the very moment when he catches himself feeling like a Medium—falling into a trance-like state, affected, however vaguely, in his body.

This reminds me of a passage in Arthur Conan Doyle’s History of Spiritualism, where Conan Doyle, himself a staunch believer in the spirits, was impressed with a Medium’s “ingenious adoption of a defense […]” when accused of trickery:

It is interesting to recall that an American reporter, on the occasion of Eusapia’s visit to his country in 1910, bluntly asked the medium if she had ever been caught tricking. Here is Eusapia’s frank reply: “many times I have been told so. You see, it is like this. Some people are at the table who expect tricks—in fact, they want them. I am in a trance. Nothing happens. They get impatient. They think of the tricks—nothing but the tricks. They put their mind on the tricks, and—I—and I automatically respond. But it is not often. They merely will me to do them. That is all” [Italics mine] (Doyle 2002, 8).
In one swift trick, this well known southern Italian medium, Eusapia Palladino, turns the opposition between truth and falsity upside down—for if mediumship depends upon the thoughts and sensations of others, and the Medium is an instrument for picking up those thoughts and sensations—of spirits but also of living persons—then if they think of the tricks—nothing but the tricks—the Medium will trick. Thus Conan Doyle admits that in addition to it being an “ingenious” response, deflecting the accusation of trickery, it is also a response which has an “element of truth in it, the psychological side of mediumship being little understood” (2002, 8).

In somehow bringing the secret of her trickery above board, and into the light of more reasonable secrets as in the “psychological side of mediumship,” Conan Doyle thinks to save the Medium both from her own admitted chicanery, and from the charge that all mediumship is merely psychological. But what makes this revelation of trickery a further concealment, is that by displacing the agency of the Medium, as the worker of the trick, the trick only becomes the more mysterious. Eusepia says they will me to do them, because they think of the tricks—nothing but the tricks. The idea is transmitted through her automatically, which of course perfectly coincides with Spiritualisms’ own explanation of mediumship as having its roots in mesmeric and hypnoid states. “I am in trance,” Eusepia says, followed by the statement, “nothing happens.” She is absent, a part of her anyway, and nothing happens, yet then something does happen: a trick is performed unwittingly. She does not will it, but the will of the other passes through her. And here it will be said that the medium authorizes herself by transposing her authority onto the spirits, or the will of others. As if the big reveal is that it is just the Medium all along, exerting her will. But this is too smug, too simple. For she locates an other will in her body—a spiritual will as if to say: even when I am faking it, or even especially when I am faking it, something real can happen through me… there is another will moving through my body, the will of an other,
operative in me. And this will—perhaps the spirits—but also, it seems to me, is the trick of the body itself: that mysterious power of the body whereby it gives itself over to an automaticity, by virtue of its own \textit{bodily unconscious} at work in every trick, and every technique for that matter (Taussig 2006). But also that the body is this doubled and displaced place of the other’s will in me, and mediumship only deepens the concealment of the body, by \textit{laying bare} this very activity—the trick by which an other will, as much as “another locality, another space, another scene” can appear in me (Lacan 1981). Suddenly its spectres all the way down, and the body… where is the body?

This is the problem of hysteria—or rather, the problem, as I take it, to which hysteria addresses itself: the split, or opposition of thought and the body. The hysterical body begins in gap between idea and body, and from this gap—a sickness that is in the world as much as in her body—she conducts her own cure: the conversion of ideas (\textit{idee fixe}) and affecting mental images into bodily symptoms. The affecting idea thus gives itself to be seen in and through a gestural theater of the body, of automatic contractions or poses. In this way I am figuring the hysteric as returning ideas to the body. For ideas to become affecting symptoms in the body, they must encounter the body as abstractions that have come to stand over and against the body in the first place. By lodging these ideas, as affects in the body—the idea is made to return, but now it is made to pass through the semiosis of the body itself, a bodily language resistant to abstraction. The hysteric is precisely the one who cannot translate the image into ordinary language, to “abreact” the affect and in this way to bring about its disappearance through associations in the talking-cure. The pathos of the hysteric precisely bans her from converting the affect, or affecting idea, into language. “The affliction sticks in her throat, spreading itself to all her organs; it remains ‘fresh’ that is, always renewing its cruelty, and it infects all representations,
which become pathogenic” (Huberman 2003, 152). At the same time, the insistence of the affect in the body produces an other language, almost hieroglyphic, of gesture—of frozen “sculptural” moments that seem to divide up the present with a past and future time.

Paris, 1891, Salpêtrière Hospital: “Pierre Janet and the Case History of an “Idée Fixe.” Justine is haunted by an idea. It is the idea of death. But this first idea is immediately replaced by a second one, more specific because it is a way of dying, the idea of “cholera.” “Many times a day Justine grew pale, had cold sweats and inexplicable episodes of trembling caused by increasingly strong thoughts of cholera” (Beloff 2008, 20). Justine has all the sensations of cholera, without the cholera. “All these images,” says Janet, “have a well defined origin, they represent all the sensation that this woman could feel were she to have cholera” [italics mine](2008, 23). Cholera is the actuality that didn’t happen, the past that wasn’t selected or actualized. Here, in Justine, cholera is a potential or incorporeal event realized in the present and expressing the full force of its sensations, of the actual “missed” event. Recalling Peirce, the “idée fixe,” we could say, has a diagrammatic function, is an energetic diagram capable of extending itself into the future, projecting the possible, by realizing itself in the “habits” of thought and the body. The idea of habit in Peirce thus proposes to move beyond the seeming antinomy between habits of everyday life, and an opening on to the potential, the “event” of the new.

Cholera remains an idea that is repeated only in the moment of the hysterical attack and in somnabulent states. It is not a conscious idea. This “idée fixe” is more like an atmosphere than an idea. Janet refers to these ideas as forming a “unified tableau” that is visual, olfactory and

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kinesthetic, uniting all the senses. The ideas affecting the hysterics compose a kind of tableau-vivant that inserts itself in the body and is expressed in gestures, movements, and words. As such the “idée fixe” is a virtual event, yet very much “real” as sensory atmosphere that is independent of the actual event (in this case of contracting cholera). This theater that was within Justine strangely divided her from herself, as if the voices were external to herself: “There are many voices mixed together: one would say that there is a crowd yelling after me” (2008, 30). This partitioning of voice divides the body into foreign spaces: “It’s my head that says the word cholera, it’s not me.”

In order to dislodge an “idées fixe,” Janet says it is not enough to “make it appear,” as Freud originally thought. “Freud and Breuer concluded that these ideas were dangerous precisely because they were hidden and were not outwardly expressed in a sufficient manner.” Thus to cure a patient means to “facilitate the outward expression of the ‘idées fixes.’” But Justine does nothing but express her “idée fixe.” Janet believes he must enter into the hallucination himself, to enter its images as well as its logic, and thereby to infect it with other images, “through a form of substitution” (2008, 26). These ideas, after all, are not flimsy things—they are perhaps more “real” than the actuality. In Justine, “we see […] the idea of cholera, pushed […] to its highest degree of perfection: an ensemble, a system of images drawn form the sense, each one of which is clear and complex enough to become real, to become objectified in the form of hallucinations and gestures” (2008, 23, 24). Janet enters into this theater, as he says, in order to slowly “divide and conquer” the symptom, yet in practice he must mimaetically enter into the hallucination himself.

What is interesting is that this “cure” must reduce this atmospheric fixed idea or diagram of cholera, to a merely “conscious idea” of cholera, thereby losing “its sensory aspect,” i.e., the
sensations (smells, sounds, and images) that had surrounded the idea (2008, 28). What is left, after this sublimation, is “a vague emotion,” an emotional state expressed in the body as sickness: cold, shivering, nausea. Accompanying this “emotional state” is the other remainder—the word Justine holds onto, “cholera,” which she murmurs to herself incessantly, like a prayer. Having been cured, more or less, Justine eventually forgot cholera. “At the time of the last cholera epidemic in Paris, Justine inquired with curiosity what this malady was,” a malady that had occupied her for twenty years of her life, and she who had “such deliria from an imaginary cholera mocked those people who had a real cholera” (2008, 31). It is as if the idea of cholera had itself inoculated her to the reality of cholera, which seemed but a shadowy affliction in comparison… a parody of the cholera she repeatedly experienced.

Between empty forms, and latent content, you have the hysterical body. For isn’t the hysteric the one who inhabits both the form of an idea that refuses to let go—Pierre Janet’s idée fixe—refuses to loosen its hold even when its meaning is lost to us? And yet, in not letting go of the idea, the idea is re-absorbed into the bodily sensorium… a sensation of cholera, if not actual cholera. Hysteria, it seems to me, refuses the abstraction of idea from affect, the form is put back into the body where it is re-expressed as bodily symptom—it is re-animated. Against the past returning as “dead image,” or as a survival, in Tylor’s sense, of a now de-animated and anachronistic “form” of religion, the past returns here as an animated and affecting form in the body, a “living image.”

**Tylor the Sham Artist**

So here, in attending numerous séances in 19th century London, the Anthropologist enters a moment of becoming-hysteric: “it was a kind of tendency to affect more than I actually felt”
To affect more than one feels, what does this mean? To simulate a feeling greater than the one that in fact possesses you? There is a separation in this statement that doubts itself, and seems to betray the gap between outward form and inner feeling, a self-consciousness that allows Tylor to doubt the authenticity of his own feelings when they arise. Moreover, it seems it is the experience of the body itself, its falling into trance, or almost, that makes Tylor conscious of shamming. He is betrayed by his own body, a feeling in the body, greater than the one he self-consciously admits to having. Like the Medium who must learn techniques for being at once conscious and unconscious, present and absent, in her attention to ephemeral images and sensations, Tylor is split between two spaces: “I seemed partly under a drowsy influence, and partly consciously shamming [italics mine].” His body registers an unconscious drowsiness, a feeling he likens to falling into trance, while his mind is curiously active, tricking him into believing he feels more than he does. Is this not the tension inhabited by a “true” and not a merely “shamming” Medium? Insofar as all mediumship enters into this problem of discerning between spirits and fabulations, sometimes fabulating or shamming a little in order to arrive at a spirit, where affecting more than one actually feels, or perhaps sees, is even a technique for getting the spirits to communicate, attaching themselves to the hem of your fabulations, so to speak? A little faith, a little trickery, and above all, not “bungling the trick” (Taussig 2006). If you fabulate well, if you manifest the spirits in a believable way—even if you are shamming, or perhaps especially because you are shamming—the sham, if done well, invites the spirits in, perhaps they take over…And how would we know if the spirits have taken over, if not as an affect in the body—like feeling suddenly “under a drowsy influence”? Conversely, even for the believer in spirits there is faking done badly—a poor performance—one that allows the believer in spirits to say, this right here “was simulated,” while out of the other side of their mouth they
say: but the spirits are “in a general way true” (Stocking 1971,100).

Tylor, the simulator both of mediumship and hysteria, makes visible a certain division—a Protestant division, I want to say, which pits the form of his behavior, what the body is doing, from the idea or meaning (what he here consciously, anyway, believes to be true: I was partly consciously shamming. Doubting his own belief, pitting his belief in doubt against his experience of being affected, allows Tylor to separate himself from those hysterical mediums who are deluded by their own performances. This seems to make him the arch simulator, however, vis a vis the other Mediums—who take him to be an even greater Medium. Recall the medium Moses who told Tylor that it was due to his being a great but “untrained” Medium that his very presence was bungling Moses’ trance-state, not to mention his tricks. The very suggestion that the “untrained” medium, Tylor, has the power to affect something despite himself, that is, despite his conscious intention, read: conscious shamming, could tell us more about the Mediums own awareness that shamming isn’t always shamming, than it does about Tylor’s capacity to discern when he is shamming and when he is not. It certainly tells us that there is no outside to mediumship, not for the Anthropologist even, for the uninitiated can also be potential Mediums.

Mauss understood his study of the techniques of the body to make visible, in our highly habituated actions and automatic gestures, the way the social gets into the body—precisely despite what we consciously believe or feel. It seems to be a way of locating in the body, those aspects of the social that tend to evade conscious address in the first place. If Tylor makes the distinction in his survivals, between the form of religion and belief, this is because he has reduced, as the philosophers say, the body to a series of movements, of outward habits devoid of inner meaning. It is this distinction, I am saying, that allows him to doubt his own performance of falling into trance, as a misrepresentation somehow of what he truly believes—for that is all
that the body does, it “represents” in outward gesture and movement, what the mind knows. If the body fails to represent what the mind consciously knows, then a gap opens, like the gap between feeling oneself slide into trance, and consciously shamming that one is falling into trance. The body is misrepresenting what the mind is conscious of. What is presupposed is that an outward form can survive its being separated from states of sensation, on the one hand, and meaning on the other; that forms do not carry affects in them, nor do they carry ideas. Abstract ideas and the abstraction of religion, is the emptying out of forms (practices, ritual etc.) and the sensations of those formal movements from the idea. If the unconscious of the body, in Mauss’ understanding, performs “forms” of behavior that lead us to an understanding of past beliefs, it seems to me this is precisely because he does not, like Tylor, separate form from affect. The body carries affecting forms in its very gestures, such that the past is re-expressed in our unconscious bodily movements.

4.9. An Intense Immobility

The good doctor Charcot was determined not to be deceived by this dissimulating figure, the producer of false images. The hysterical having been defined by Briquet as “A proteus who represents himself in a thousand guises and cannot be grasped in any of them”, not least she mimics in her body a diversity of ailments (Huberman 2003). Trying to capture this modern Proteus in a frozen image, so as to tabulate and organize the pathology, was in Charcot’s theater of hysteria, akin to wielding the powers of the Gorgon, who changes you to stone, against the ever shifting, ever changing and dissimulating symptom. We see in the photographic experiments conducted in Charcot’s 19th century studies of hysterics at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, a figure placed before a black curtain, in a darkened room. The sudden flash of the camera
sets the body in motion—contraction, convulsion, catalepsy. With the shock of the flash, as Ulrich Baer has written “the explosion of light triggered experientially a double petrification, mechanically causing in the body the same thing that happens on the film: the body is petrified in an image of “intense immobility” (Baer 2002).

It is to the hysteric as a figure both of ecstatic simulation and of this “intense immobility,” that I want to turn. For in this image, caught in the flash of the camera as nosological instrument, is an image of a body affected, pulled in different directions by unseen forces. She is frozen in a gesture of movement. A froze movement. The image of the hysteric in Charcot’s photographic tableau is reminiscent of another image of “intense immobility.” What Aby Warburg, in his “critical iconology” located in the frozen sculptural gestures of ancient Greek and Roman images of ecstatically dancing maenads or “Ninfa,” and in Botticelli’s Venus, was an intensive affective movement, betrayed in the folds of a dress, or the wind in the hair (Michaud 2004, 74). Warburg was inspired by, A Study for a Composition of Venus Emerging from the Waves, made by one of Botticelli’s students. Here five figures of a “girl corresponding to the nymph type,” appear in varying degrees of presence—some of the figures only partially there, like a spectrally hovering torso in the left corner of the picture, then culminating in a fuller view of the entire figure:

She is off balance, legs crossed, feet quite spread, in a posture that appears to be an effect of the displacement of the body in space, a displacement indicated by the treatment of two peripheral accessory elements (Betiwerke), a lock of loose hair and a looped veil. (Michaud 2004, 74).

The figure is displaced in space by the movement indicated in, “a lock of loose hair and a looped veil.” The movement frozen in the flowing gowns of ecstatically dancing maenads were a favorite theme of Warburg’s it seems, and this particular image is notable, for it showed five figures in partial figuration, composing an image of movement, “the swirling motion of a single
figure moving to the right” (Michaud 2004, 74). Warburg’s interest in Botticelli’s female figures, which he reads as resurrections of the ecstatic figures of ancient maenads, lies in their capacity, as Michaud says, “to express the phenomena of appearance and disappearance, seeking to reproduce not so much the figure depicted as the fact of figuration itself, and the pulsing of presence and absence conditioning it [italics mine]” (2004, 72).

To “return the figure to the “event of its singular appearance,” is what Warburg located in these ecstatic images of the female figure, images where the figure “leaves in her wake the unstable trace of her doubles,” and this as a sign of “the body striving in motion.” Here, the coming into being of the figure in a moment, is made visible as a spectral displacement, I want to say, of the body itself. By its very emergence as figure, the body itself is called into question—the body displaces itself, doubled, by its own spectral trace—a trace that makes visible not only a potential movement in the figure, but the “fact of figuration,” as conditioned by a “pulsing of presence and absence” (Michaud 2004, 72, 86). She is off balance.

And Didi-Huberman, known in part for his influential work on hysteria, compares Warburg’s “Ninfa,” or maenads, to Charcot’s tabulations of hysterical poses. Noting Siegrid Schade’s claim that Charcot might be considered Warburg’s predecessor, “when it comes to interdisciplinarity, iconographic collection, the observation of the body during moments of pathos, of passion, and even of Dionysiac madness” (Huberman 2003, 629). While there are similarities—“both forms of knowledge present themselves as explorations of a clinical archive; both relied on an abundant use of photograph; and both resulted in the creation of iconographic repository”—the two, argues Huberman, could not be more opposed at every point. Charcot’s work is reductive precisely of that which interests Warburg in these maenadic figures: Charcot’s “utilitarian use of figures always relates to an epistemic operation that aims to reduce the
essentially proto-form, mutable and metamorphic character of the hysterical symptom, this moving heap of serpents traversing the body, to the simple level of an ordered tableau with temporal and visual force of law.” While Warburg, never ceased being open to, and occupied with, this very serpentine mutability of the affected body—he “made the symptom a constant, constantly open work of over-determination.” In his attempt to tabulate the symptoms of hysteria, Charcot “wanted to master the difference of the symptom,” and this involved “making the hysterics themselves more mad,” Huberman claims, by “making them conform to the images that preceded them in his ‘artistic iconography,’” which in Richet’s drawings resembled the dancing maenads. In this way he committed both a “historical sophism” and an iconographic sophism,” according to Huberman, “in which real, suffering bodies were forced to create themselves in the image of figures collected in atlases as “proofs” of a definitely established clinical tableau” (2001, 630).

And this is the distinction I would like to draw out—a distinction that takes us back to a problem of abstraction, the alienation of the image from the body, which I have been circling around. If Charcot made the affected and afflicted body conform to an already recognizable set of images belonging to the realm of religion, themselves deemed expressions of pathology—those of the possessed, the mystically enraptured, the ecstatic female—he thereby reduced the affect, as a presence in the body, to a logic of recognition and resemblance, a difference within sameness. Thus the affected body is forced to conform to a preexisting typology of images that displace the presence of the affect itself. The body forced to imitate these abstracted images is only made more “mad,” presumably because this displacement of the affects of the hysteric onto

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62 “Whether by recourse to hypnosis, experimentation with electric-shock therapy or through the establishment of an `iconography', Charcot's stake remained the same: he wanted to master the differences of the symptom” (Huberman 2001).
an external image, only further irritates, or conjures, her very symptom—that of the displacement between image and body, or idea and body.

Warburg’s critical iconology was something altogether different. The affected body is not forced to imitate or resemble history, to conform to an already determined image of itself—rather, images of affected bodies—such as the one’s Warburg was interested in, reflect what he called a *pathos formel*: “the visible symptoms: corporeal gestural, presented, figured—of a psychic time irreducible to the simple thread of rhetorical, sentimental, or individual turns” (Huberman 2001). *Pathos formel* concerned the survival in images—inspired by the frozen gestures of female maenads in ancient iconography—of affective forces of the past in the present. As such, I want to say that *pathos formel* are almost an inversion of Tylor’s survivals, insofar as what survives is not the empty form, but a the form or image pregnant with an affective trace.

Warburg’s conceptualization of the Image, his “critical iconology,” attempted to fuse cultural interpretation, and thus ethnology with art-images. Warburg understood images as “intervals”—mediating bodies, which occupy a temporal and affective zone between the “primitive” or archaic forces of the pagan past and the rational, modern present. He thus looked to the image as an intermediary (*Interval*) between the modern binaries of myth and history, nature and culture, “primitive” and modern. In his double concept of the Image, *Pathosformel* and *Nachleben*, concerns both the affective and the temporal “survival” of the past in the modern present. Because Warburg is after the “history of images” with the “psychology of expression,” his work has been understood as concerning psychic survivals, where what survives is not delimited to the internal intension of a subject but concerns the remainder of trans-individual, impersonal (or perhaps pre-subjective) affective states (Huberman 2001).
The Nachleben or after-life of images, in this understanding, would concern the survival of a “psychic time,” as the surfacing of the untimely, or counter-time within homogeneous historical time, while the Pathosformel concerns the survival of a “psychic gesture”, the counter-movement of an affective trace, the survival of archaic intensities or pathos. The irreducibility of the affective quality of images to figural or semiotic systems returns the image a power of affective expression of which the dominant strain within western metaphysics has deprived it. Pathosformel have much more to do with the re-expression of a particular mind-body, image-reality relation (and in a larger sense, nature-culture) than simply with affective states. What is named in the Pathosformel is the after-life of energetic affects of a primal confrontation with chaos, now congealed in images which function as mimetic talisman against the primal forces of irrationality and dissolution. Such a conceptualization of images takes the image out of its Platonic status as always secondary static representation, a mere copy that no longer contains the power of the original or “cause” within itself, and returns to the image the sensual-affective power of a mimetic movement between nature and culture, or between first-nature and second-nature.63 Pathosformel are like the concretion of as affective states in an image—folding the unseen into the moment of conscious seeing.

4.7. Circular Transformations

A diagrammatic drawing of the affective states of hysteria might look a lot like a vertical spiral, like a spinning top, circling around a central axis—at least that is how I imagine it. The ancient Greek story of Proteus, himself an image, as we have seen, of the many faces of hysteric

63 In this sense, the Image, no longer a mere effect or copy of an original cause becomes itself immanent to that cause – and thus capable of re-releasing the affective qualities of an original encounter.
simulation, is related by Elias Canetti, in his work *Crowds and Power*, as an example of what he calls “circular” forms of transformation, as opposed to linear “flight” transformations (1984). The story begins with Menelaus who, “on his way home from Troy, has been driven off his course by adverse winds.” He finds himself on the coast of Egypt where Proteus, the “wise Old Man of the sea” lives (Canetti 1984, 344). Proteus is not only the Old Man of the Sea but a prophesier. Menelaus, eager to find his way home, is told he must seize Proteus and force him to speak if he wants to hear the Old Man’s prophecy. So he comes up with a plan, thanks to Proteus’ daughter, that involves dressing in the skins of seals and hiding, waiting for Proteus, the herder of seals, to approach the sand. When Proteus lies down to sleep in the sand next to his seals, Menelaus and his gang suddenly “leap upon him, seize him, and hold him fast” (Canetti 1984, 344):

Proteus tries to escape form them by assuming all kinds of shapes. First he turns into a lion, then into a snake; but they still keep hold of him. He becomes a panther and then a giant boar; but they do not let go. He turns into water and then a tree in full leaf; but still they hold him fast. All the transformations by which he tries to escape take place within the grasp of their hands. In the end he tires, resumes his own shape, that of Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, asks them what they want and answers their questions [italics mine].

The transformations are circular because “everything happens on one spot. Each transformation is an attempt to break out in another shape, in a different direction […] but each is fruitless and ends where it began […]]” (Canetti 1984, 345). And in another example, Canetti relates the story of Thetis who finds herself a captive, held fast by an assailant who never lets go, echoing the myth of Proteus. She is a goddess, seized by Peleus, a mortal”: “she resists union with him, regarding him as unworthy of her” (1984, 345). Captive to his grip, she tries to transform herself to escape his grasp: “she tries all kinds of metamorphoses; she turns into fire and water, into a lion and a snake; but he still holds her. She changes into an enormous, slippery cuttle-fish and
squirts ink at him [!]. But it is all useless […] Each of them is an attempt to find a direction in which she can escape. She moves within a circle trying to find a point of release. But nowhere does she succeed in breaking out of the circle and so she remains a prisoner and finally surrenders *in her own person*, as Thetis herself, the center of all the transformations” (Canetti 1984, 345).

Canetti relates this second story because it exemplifies, he says, the “major attacks of hysteria, “ which are nothing but a series of violent transformations for flight,” in which the “sufferer feels seized by a superior power.” The erotic overtones of the Thetis story only emphasize the analogy to hysteria and draw out one of its most striking features, “the frequency of the transition from processes of an erotic to those of a religious nature,” says Canetti. This feeling “seized by a superior power,” is presumably the point of contact between the hysterical and the religious experience—but such points of contact also a common experience in the body, as I’ve suggested, and not least the iconography of hysteria which explicitly linked the hysteric to mystical and possessed states. Canetti sees, in such circular transformations an essential failures to escape, failures of “flight,” for they return to the “same” place of identity where the series of transformations began. This understanding seems to elide the sheer abundance in transformations—which Canetti himself calls “amazing”—the intense plasticity of these bodies to transform themselves again and again, even, or especially as they are held *in place*. Hysteria we know, always gets a bad rap. But isn’t there something in such an image of the “circular transformation,” if we consider the fact that we are always in a place of constraint, that we are subjectivized in real and embodied ways by forces discursively and materially acting upon our very bodies? To me the image of the circular transformation, is one of a *transitional body*—a body *between* the place of control and the potentiality of something else—a body porous and
open to… what exactly? Another reality, within this one? Let us not forget that the both Proteus and Thetis when held in place do not wither and die under their subjection, but prophesy and love. The one is “forced to prophesy,” the other is “forced to love.” And yes, it is a little more difficult (!) given that this story of power is gendered as a rape scene—she is forced, after all, to give herself over… but if we bracket this specific content, maybe this story of power is not simply a story of one overpowering another. Maybe it is a transformation that forces love—forces the problem of love, we could say. Or in Proteus’ story, it forces the problem of prophesy; the outcome of his intensified circular movement is, after all, prophetic speech—speaking from an unknown place of unknown futures. The lover and the prophet, united in a single image. And what to make then of the hysteric, does she not prophesy? Does she not love? I mean this both in the sense that they hysteric is affected by an erotics of the past, a spectral erotics lets say, and in the sense of her love of the analyst, a love that gives birth to that idea so mysterious yet central to psychoanalysis, the idea of transference, as that other enigma whereby various kinds of relations are played out, performed and really lived between patient and doctor? And if everything she says is an enigma, requiring an interpreter in the likes of Freud to draw out her meaning as “talking cure,” this, of course, fails. Hysteria is, after all, the first or “original” problem of psychoanalysis and the enigma it never found a “cure” for.

Finally, there is the image of the Shaman—who interestingly, like the Medium, is described as taking control of his own transformations. He is “active,” in contrast to the implied passivity of the hysteric, who is not active because under a “superior power.” He actively seizes the spirits and “forces them to help him in his undertakings” (Canetti 1984, 346). Though he too, as in the figure of Proteus and Thetis, remains on the spot, dancing in a circle…. : The shaman too “remains on the spot during a whole séance” (Canetti 1984, 346). Using the term séance to
describe the circular space of Shamanism—the shaman dancing in the middle with the audience seated around him—draws a parallel image to modern Spiritualism with its séance circles, only here it is the table at the center, a circular object around which individual bodies are threaded together, connecting nerves and energies, to form a communication machine.

Canetti ends his story of Proteus with the words: “in the end he was to accept his fate and do what is demanded of him” (1984, 345). It is not the linear movement as “line of flight” that here constitutes an escape – it is not the rehearsal of a movement that crosses and conquers space, that understands liberation as a conversion from one state to another; here we have another image. The image is that of a circle, and in the circle there stands a leaping figure. A figure leaping in place—but with every leap, the ground beneath and above her shifts. This is non-linear movement, it is true – it is one that begins where one is, in the place of being caught, in the place of captivity – but it effects an intensive, as opposed to extensive, transformation. Proteus may again become the Old Man of the Sea, but that does not mean a change has not taken place. It is rather to take seriously the forms and Shapes that constitute us, constrain us, and give themselves over to new performances. To not escape to an elsewhere, never here. Instead to will what happens to us—a leaping into Amor Fati: “he was to accept his fate.”

**Leaping in Place**

The Medium is after all a figure of ambivalent returns—on the one hand, making return the past—in affective images—spirits who carry milieus with them. On the other, reducing the past to already recognizable images, as in the settler’s imagination of the Indian. The image I want to leave you with is that of a figure leaping in place. Perhaps this is the Medium.
She is seated in her armchair, as different landscapes move through her. Outwardly she is frozen in a static gesture. Inwardly, she is moved by other affects, displaced by other spectral bodies. Inwardly the body she is in, the body that sits heavily in the armchair, has floated to the ceiling, her head is in the clouds. With every leap, she enters this other space in the clouds, again and again. Every image is a leap into a small world, a milieu of sensation unto itself. Here, abstracted images are folded back into the milieu of the body, a milieu of sensation—a bodily space making room and simultaneously intensifying the images. Other pasts grow in her, and for a time, she makes them endure. She always returns to the center, to her own body, it is true. But it seems these are not merely failed attempts at escape, but a different image of transformation. An image beyond the fantasy of settlement’s conversions of space and bodies, in pursuit of an ever-receding frontier, a linear fantasy unfolding within a linear history. Instead of moving from one state to another, from one conversion to another, the Medium is a figure, like the Hysteric, of repetition. In her leaping the conversion fails. A disorder becomes visible: the insistence on the past, which has not been abstracted to Idea, or laid to rest as Memory. The many spectral images rise to the surface within her, with every leap, and they stick in the body. It is not possible to move forward, only to leap in place. Of course the Medium, unlike the Hysteric, finds a way to loose those images from getting stuck in the body, from becoming a sickness in the body. She learns a controlled dance, the techniques of the leap, whereby the images are made to flow like water.

Where is her body, this leaping Medium? It is up and down, it is neither here nor there. Her body is always in two places at once, in the clouds with the spirits, and here on the ground. Hers is a displaced body, the body as a displaced place, hovering in the between, somewhere in the middle. And isn’t this middle, between what we felt and perceive, and consciousness, where
psychoanalysis has located the real? Psychoanalysis tells us that reality it itself displaced, the real is always beneath, \textit{unterlegt} (literally: laid under) or \textit{untertragen} (literally:carried under). Reality lags behind consciousness, it is “in abeyance there, awaiting attention” (Lacan 1981,56). Lacan’s real is there in the perception of what did not happen, consciously at least. The gap of the real arises within this displaced place of the present, between perception and consciousness—for it is the idea of an elsewhere that rises up within the present, \textit{Die Idee einer anderen Lokalitaet}, says Freud, “the idea of another locality,” but also, adds Lacan, “another space, another scene, the between […] (Lacan 1981, 56). What is it to sense a spirit? It is an encounter. It is not the encounter of “what occurs” consciously anyway, but the encounter “within what occurs.”

Deleuze of course said this the \textit{event}: “the event is not what occurs (an accident), it is rather inside what occurs, the purely expressed. It signals and awaits us” (Deleuze 1990,149). For Lacan, the encounter is an event where we suddenly conceive of the reality that is always beneath (or above), “what happens,” the unterlegt and untetragen. Encounter thus concerns the “radical point in the real” where the real is expressed—as percept or affect of the real. Attending to the spirits seems a lot like an attention to the real, as the “missed” encounter within what happens to us. An attention that follows the mysterious law of traumatic return, marked by a doubleness: part \textit{Zwang}, restraint or necessity, and part \textit{Wiederholung}, repetition (Lacan 1981). The Medium exerts retrained “control,” an active passivity that makes room for the revenant. And perhaps here, the Medium in her way, wills that which presents itself as part of our real, the real that remains unsettled, because pressed beneath, our fantasies and the concretizations of settlement.

Leaping in place always involves a subtle “change of will,” that moves through the “whole body”; it is the exchange of an “organic will for a spiritual will”—and it is by virtue of
this spiritual will that we will “not exactly what occurs, but something in that which occurs, something yet to come which would be consistent with what occurs, in accordance with the laws of an obscure, humerous conformity: the Event” (Deleuze 1990).
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