“Let’s Go, Ghouls!”: Spiritualism and the Advancement of Women Through Mediumship Within the United States

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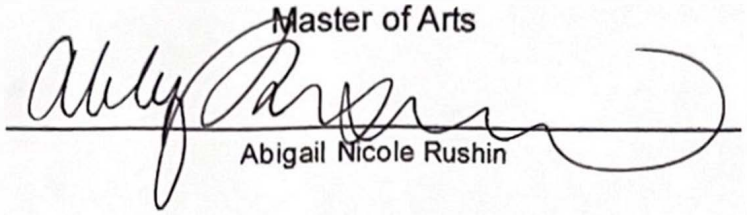

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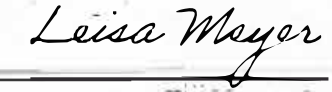

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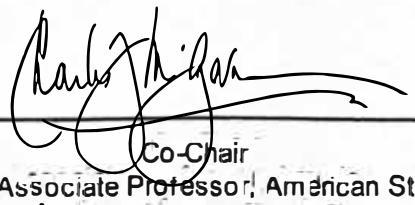

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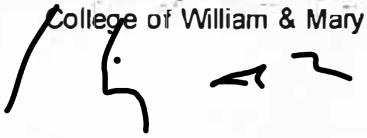

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ABSTRACT

A historical gender norm that has continued to undergird the gender system in the United States is that a woman is to be below a man in all matters. The two essays bound to this thesis dissect the relationship between U.S. American women and the Spiritualism movement that began in the mid-nineteenth century. This movement created opportunities for some who participated within it to become economically and socially independent. The first essay, “Spirituality Sold: How Women Took Advantage of Spiritualism Within the United States in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” examines how women utilized their roles in the Spiritualism movement in order to garner economic success as well as a public presence when prescriptive norms dictated they were to be confined to their homes. For many within Western countries during this period, the ideal role for a respectable woman was (and unfortunately still is in some instances) to tend to her husband and his children. In my thesis I argue that Spiritualism, or the belief that humans could commune with the dead, was the “soul sister” to the women’s rights movement that emerged in nineteenth century U.S. America. Within Spiritualism, practitioners and mediums exalted femininity. Some women used their ability (or claim thereof) to talk to the spirits of deceased loved ones to make not only a name for themselves and carve a place within the economic sphere of the United States. The most well-known of these women were respected not only as renowned psychic mediums but also free thinkers and speakers on important social issues, earthly and other-worldly. Such women knew what they were doing with mediumship, and for that, they must be commended

However, the belief that psychic mediums were and still are true, authentic communicators with the “other side” was fairly short-lived during and became a subject of critique and intense scrutiny with many (especially men) attempting to debunk these women’s practices and self-proclaimed abilities. The second essay, “From Spiritualists to Swindlers: The Contradictory Transformation of Support for Spiritualism and Female Psychic Mediums in the United States Beginning in the Twentieth Century,” interrogates the scientific technologies and psychological break-throughs that prompted many within the American spiritual counter public to increasingly doubt the veracity and authenticity of female psychic mediums.

Drawing on examples from the first essay, the second portion of this thesis aims to examine why mediumship has been called into question since the nineteenth century and why, despite these notions of falsehoods amongst self-proclaimed “mediums” and “psychics,” many people then and today still choose to seek out psychic help. No matter if one were to view Spiritualism today or yesterday, one question raises itself into consideration for this particular body of research: why do people even seek out communing with the deceased and/or answering questions about themselves from others?

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincerest thanks to my advisor, Professor Leisa Meyer, as well as to Professors Charles McGovern and Elizabeth Losh. Professor Meyer, without your guidance throughout my time at The College of William and Mary, I may have spun in circles. Thank you for all the positive recommendations when I needed them most and for always having an ear to listen to my questions and everything in between. To Professors McGovern and Losh, your feedback from the very start of the academic year has made me not only a better academic, but a better colleague. Thank you for aiding me in finding a space to ponder colossal matters and to ramble on about my curiosities. My deepest thanks to you all for your patience and review of this passion of mine.

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To my grandmothers and aunts, you are the women I wish to be and the woman I already am. I can never thank you all enough for your support in my twenty five years and for being my earthly mothers.

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To sevgilim, Eren, who must have fallen from the heavens. From the moment I met you, you have 100% been in my corner. Your love and devotion is possibly the best thing to come about in my life, and I cannot wait to step into this next chapter with you. Thank you for opening my eyes to the world and for always being patient with me and my race car of a mind. *Seni seviyorum.*

I wish to thank most ardently my “soul” sisters Mackenzie and Lacey for their continuous friendship over the years, especially to Mackenzie who somehow has put up with me for fourteen years. You both fill my life with laughter, and one day, we will rule the world. Here’s to causing chaos when we are old.

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As I have made many acknowledgements, please note I may not have typed out every single person who has encouraged me to pursue my passions over the years. You know who you are, and I thank you today and everyday.

This Thesis is dedicated to my mother, who holds the key to my heart and to what lies beyond…

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1: Introducing *"Let's Go, Ghouls!": Spiritualism and the Advancement of Women Through Mediumship Within the United States*

Shania Twain has always been a "girl's-girl," and her chart-topping song *Man! I Feel Like a Woman!* possibly alludes to this notion. My mother and aunt would always blare this anthem throughout the house of my youth, and I quickly came to associate the familiar "da da dunuh duh da da…let's go girls!" with feelings of female empowerment.[1] As young as four years old, the women in my family dancing me around the room to this song made me proud to be a girl in a world full of boys. That same spirit of feminine comradery, I believe, traipsed its way throughout the various facets of United States Spiritualism and into the hearts of women keen on believing in the movement.[2] Intertwining itself with my lifelong love for ghost hunting television programs and all things spooky, the various pages of *"Let's Go, Ghouls!": Spiritualism and the Advancement of Women Through Mediumship Within the United States* was born.

The first section of this thesis is entitled "Spirituality Sold: How Women Took Advantage of Spiritualism Within the United States in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries." I came into the American Studies Graduate Program at The College of William and Mary knowing I wanted to write about United States women's history. Kudos to Dr. Simon Stow's "Introduction to American Studies" class that taught me that it was okay to write about ghosts AND women's history. Arguably, the early days

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[1] Shania Twain, "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" by Shania Twain and Robert John "Mutt" Lange, Mercury Nashville, track 8 on *Come on Over*, 1999, compact disc.

[2] It should be noted that while a plethora of women from diverse ethnicities, backgrounds, and socioeconomic standings did participate in the Spiritualism movement, for the purposes of this thesis, the "women" discussed refer to mainly white, working class women. Moving forward, the term "woman" throughout this body of research aligns itself with the description in this footnote.

of the women's rights movement in the nineteenth century combined and ignited with the Spiritualist movement, and the two supported each other and made them the social influencers they would become. Ghosts allowed many women a platform and a voice in a man's world, and the nineteenth century saw some U.S. American women leaping away from the kitchen and into the halls of theological discussion in public platforms. The first section therefore examines how the women who participated in the Spiritualism movement in United States during the nineteenth century demonstrated how Spiritualism and the women's rights movements of the nineteenth century were cut from the same cloth. Ultimately, both movements aided each other in the growing push for gender equality.

In the twenty-first century, while it no longer bears the name of "Spiritualism," the "economy of the supernatural" is still very much alive. The second part of this thesis is entitled "From Spiritualists to Swindlers: The Contradictory Transformation of Support for Spiritualism and Female Psychic Mediums in the United States Beginning in the Twentieth Century" and comes from a paper I wrote for Dr. Charles McGovern's class "Modern America," and I thank him for allowing the creative space to explore this topic. The popularization of reality television gave way for many alleged mediums, psychics, and clairvoyants to offer their services to those grieving from the loss of a loved one. "From Spiritualists to Swindlers" examines what were the social and cultural shifts in the United States that framed the increasing critique of women psychic mediums, moving from what had been strong support of their work to being placed on the social chopping block as frauds.

Ultimately, people are inclined to accept beliefs on the basis of personal goals, or what they *want* to believe, rather than on reliable evidence.[3] Mediumship supports what one wants to hear and allows a person to find some semblance of closure to their unanswered questions. From my own personal life, I could not handle the loss of my mother thanks to cancer at the age of fifteen (still cannot, let's be honest). I clearly recall multiple people advising me to seek out a medium so that I could get in contact with my mother to know that she was okay and at peace. Grief from the loss of a loved one is a horrible experience, so it is not surprising that people, like those around me during that time, will be highly motivated to get information that will make them feel better. I, for one, did not choose the mediumship route. However, many U.S. Americans from diverse backgrounds beginning in the nineteenth century have sought out psychic mediumship and the paranormal to explain life after death. So, too, shall I.

[3] For more information on why people choose to believe their own evaluations of the world and not the factual evidence in existence, please see Dr. Neil Dagnall and Dr. Ken Drinkwater, "The science of why so many people believe in psychic powers," *Manchester Metropolitan University*, 5 February 2019, accessed 2 May 2024, https://www.mmu.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/story/9435/ for more information. This informative explanation is embedded within this thesis beginning on page 25.

Chapter Two: "Spirituality Sold: How Women Took Advantage of Spiritualism Within the United States in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries"

Communicating with the spirits of the dead has had a long-standing history within many cultures. Whether it be through the seeking out of trained professionals or the attempt on one's own to navigate the spiritual realm, human beings have sought the answer to what occurs after one dies. Some, like Leo Marks and Mary Elizabeth Frye, used their poetry to articulate their beliefs in life blossoming after death. "Yet death will be but a pause,"[4] is one example of an expression of this yearning from Marks who believed his girlfriend's untimely death was not her life's end. Frye's "Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there. I did not die," alludes to Frye's belief that death was an end but a new beginning.[5] Spiritualists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shared Frye's belief and set out to unveil the secrets of what lay beyond death's gate. To achieve this goal, Spiritualism, or the belief that humans can commune with spirits of the dead, called upon Spiritualists to prove existence on the other side through not only their faith but through concrete evidence.[6]

Exploding into popularity in the mid-nineteenth century in the United States, Spiritualism was a prime example of many men and women within the United States coming together as proclaimed "spiritualists" in order to answer the arguably most unanswered question of all time: what happens after we die? Many Spiritualists turned

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[4] Michele Meleen, "25 Famous Poems About Death, Dying, & the Afterlife," Love to Know, LovetoKnow Media, 23 February 2022, https://www.lovetoknow.com/life/grief-loss/famous-poems-about-death.

[5] "Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep Poem by Mary Elizabeth Frye," *PoemHunter.Com*, 2 February 2015, https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/do-not-stand-at-my-grave-and-weep/.

[6] Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 30.

to séances, or the French term for “sessions,” to call forth spirits of the deceased to answer this ever-pressing question, usually either by themselves or with a group.[7] Séances were born in the very parlors of places people called home as a way for those mourning to reach beyond the veil and speak to their lost loved ones through self-proclaimed mediums. During periods of strife and loss attributable to warfare, such as the Civil War era in the United States, families of the fallen felt a pull towards seeking out what happened to the souls of their deceased.[8]

For believers beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Spiritualism was a “practice of deep intimacy” that attempted to cross intangible boundaries in order to understand the afterlife.[9] The coining of the term “Spiritualist” and modern Spiritualism as a social and spiritual movement came in part from Horace Greeley, a renowned United States newspaper editor, publisher, and eventual Spiritualist himself. In his newspaper, the *Spiritual Telegraph*, he published stories of spiritual occurrences and communications between the living and the dead. In the spring of 1852, Greeley wrote on the popularity of the movement and for the first time gave a name to it in print: Modern Spiritualism, which later in historical record became known simply as “Spiritualism.” The followers of and participants in this movement, mainly women, were also given the name “Spiritualists” as the name stuck after it was printed for the first time in Greeley’s *Spiritual Telegraph*.[10]

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[7] Claire Goodchild, *The Book of Séances: A Guide to Divination and Speaking to Spirits*, (New York: Voracious / Little, Brown and Company, 2022), 29.

[8] Horowitz 72-73.

[9] Horowitz 67.

[10] Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), page 147 and 148.

The research focuses on ways in which many women in particular used Spiritualism to advance themselves as entrepreneurs within the United States and as equal individuals in a patriarchal society that normatively (and legally) defined women as submissive to men and ideally dwelling predominately within the domestic domain. Through business ventures, such as séances, psychic mediumship, and fortune telling, women were able to move away from or contest this prescriptive confinement and allow themselves to become successful and respected individuals. Mass casualties, such as from the Civil War, and diseases of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought loved ones of the deceased to the thresholds of psychic mediums searching for closure.[11] These stressors, conjoined with the rise of the early women's rights movement and the advancement of advertisement business models, allowed Spiritualism to become what Claire Goodchild calls "an all-out craze" beginning in the mid-nineteenth century.[12]

During the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the Western belief that women were akin to supernatural forces was one of the major rubrics framing Western religious beliefs and practices. While women had been persecuted as witches in the late seventeenth century in what is now the United States, the word "witchcraft" was not often associated with Spiritualists of the nineteenth century. However, the belief that parts of femininity were aligned with the supernatural became a way for men to explain why women possessed such qualities that allowed their sensitive selves to commune

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[11] While many conflicts were occurring around the world during the nineteenth century, the Civil War was the main conflict within the U.S. context that saw loved ones reaching out to psychic mediums and Spiritualists for closure. War took away sons, fathers, grandfathers, etc., and playing off of many U.S. Americans' belief in Christianity, many wanted clarity on if their loved one had passed on or was suffering.

[12] Goodchild 33.

with otherworldly energies.[13] Because of this, femininity and its tie to the supernatural became a defining quality of the Spiritualism movement in the United States, especially beginning in 1848.

The Hydesville, New York sisters Catharine “Kate” and Margaretta “Margaret” Fox reported hearing strange rapping sounds within their house constantly. The Fox sisters were from the “Burned-Over” District of upstate New York. Settled by the Shakers, a radical Christian sect, in the eighteenth century, the “Burned-Over” District became what historian Mitch Horowitz analyzed as “central to the development of mystical religions in America.” [14] A “torrent of religious passion” during the Second Great Awakening saw preachers spark a metaphorical fire across the region within the minds and spirits of eager listeners gathered inside these tented revival meetings. Through this “awakening,” the United States Spiritualism movement took root, and soon-to-be fans of the Fox sisters were a part of this spiritually-curious conglomerate that came to upper New York state specifically to learn, listen, and believe in mystical ideologies.[15]

The Fox sisters started reporting that they could communicate with a deceased individual who had allegedly been murdered and buried in the cellar below their house years prior. “Mr. Splitfoot,” the entity the girls were supposedly communicating with, was allegedly a Mr. Charles B. Rosna. Word quickly spread and hundreds, including the Foxes own neighbors, flocked to the Fox home to meet “the girls who talked to the

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[13] For more information on the term “witch” as applied to women, see Pam Grossman, *Waking the Witch: Reflections on Women, Magic, and Power* (New York: Gallery Books, 2019), page 149.

[14] Horowitz 12-14.

[15] Horowitz 15.

dead." [16] Their elder sister, Leah, after hearing of her sisters' popularity, made both Kate and Margaret come live with her in Rochester where it was Leah who saw a business opportunity for all of them. The three sisters held paid séances with Leah appointing herself as the "interpreter" of the rappings. Their popularity quickly grew abundantly, and the Fox girls began to travel to New York, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. where large crowds of believers and skeptics came to see the supernatural sisters. Pam Grossman, a researcher on magical women in the United States, believes that the Fox sisters ignited the Spiritualism movement in nineteenth century America as "The craze for having heart-to-hearts with the disembodied began to take hold." [17]

The Fox sisters ultimately proved that Spiritualism could be a direct route to financial success for those female Spiritualists who sought to make a name for themselves in the economic realms of nineteenth and early twentieth century America. Spirit or "psychic" mediumship became one of the very small set of professions available to women beginning in the nineteenth century as women now had the ability to make money and had a small stake in having public influence over others. Mediums were self-proclaimed individuals, mainly women, who dedicated their livelihoods and careers to the idea that they had a direct line of communication to the other side.[18] Mediumship furthermore opened the door for women to feel confident in themselves and their intellectual capabilities as well as overcome their fears on existing social expectations and gender structures.

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[16] Grossman 150.

[17] Grossman 150.

[18]Anne Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth Century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), page 53.

Through the process known as the “séance,” women were able to elevate themselves not only as respected members of society and intellectuals, but they were turning a profit and making a name for themselves within the business realm of the nineteenth century. A séance was “an attempt by an individual or a group of people to contact and communicate with the spirits of the Dead,” as defined by author Claire Goodchild in *The Book of Séances: A Guide to Divination and Speaking to Spirits*. Séances are not the first of its kind as many different cultures throughout history have attempted to contact the deceased through group involvements. Traditionally, American séance readings were invoked by a medium (in most cases, a woman) who provided a direct energetic link to the other side to a group of participants.[19]

Séances could also be performed through a process called “table turning” where the group sits around a table holding hands in a room illuminated only by candles. The medium would ask for a spirit to make its presence known by knocking, moving, or even lifting the table.[20] Through the séance, the medium had ultimate control. Many nineteenth century American women could have potentially seen this as not only a financial opportunity but also as a societal advancement. Mediumship meant having your voice listened to above all others in the room, and because women were not expected to speak in public during the nineteenth century, mediumship could potentially be a vessel for some women’s voices and their control over their social surroundings.

Public influence led to many businesswomen beginning to advertise themselves as mediums, clairvoyants, trance speakers, and fortune tellers. One woman by the name of Madam Marcia, being in the services of the United States capitol’s rich and

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[19] Goodchild 29.

[20] Goodchild 30.

famous, was regularly advertised in the *Bisbee Daily Review* as the "astrologer to official Washington."[21] Marcia had an entire article dedicated to her fortunes and astrological assumptions on what was to come with her many prophecies and predictions being inspired by the elite in Washington and government leaders, all of which were transcribed into print. When outsiders attempted to discredit Marcia, such as Harry Houdini in 1926 famously, she went back to similar verbiage as seen in such printings as one in the May 1, 1921 *Bisbee* which read "I am not a fortune teller. I am a scientist."[22]

Another woman who appeared regularly in American advertisements was Madame La Branch, a self proclaimed "clairvoyant, seeress, and spiritualist," who was also advertised as a "scientific physician," thereby drawing in even more clients.[23] By advertising herself as both a Spiritualist and a physician, clientele who read this advertisement would arguably culminate the two terms to mean the same thing as La Branch attempted to make it appear as if spirituality and medical practices are the same. La Branch stands for herself and other Spiritualist women who sought to make a name and fortune for themselves through any means necessary, even if that meant soliciting non-professional, medical advice to clientele.

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[21] "*Bisbee daily review,* (Bisbee, Ariz.). 01 May 1921," *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024827/1921-05-01/ed-1/seq-20/>.

[22] "*Bisbee daily review,* (Bisbee, Ariz.). 01 May 1921," *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024827/1921-05-01/ed-1/seq-20/>.

[23] Madame La Branch, "Arrival Extraordinary! Mme. La Branch," advertisement, 1865, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.wm.edu/iw-search/we/Evans/?p_product=EAIX&p_theme=eai&p_nbid=V6BJ65IYMTcwMjkwNjIxNy44MTM2OjE6MTQ6MTI4LjIzOS45OS4xNDA&p_action=doc&p_queryname=1&p_docref=v2:10D2F64C960591AE@EAIX-10F455D4B4D27600@22828-@1.

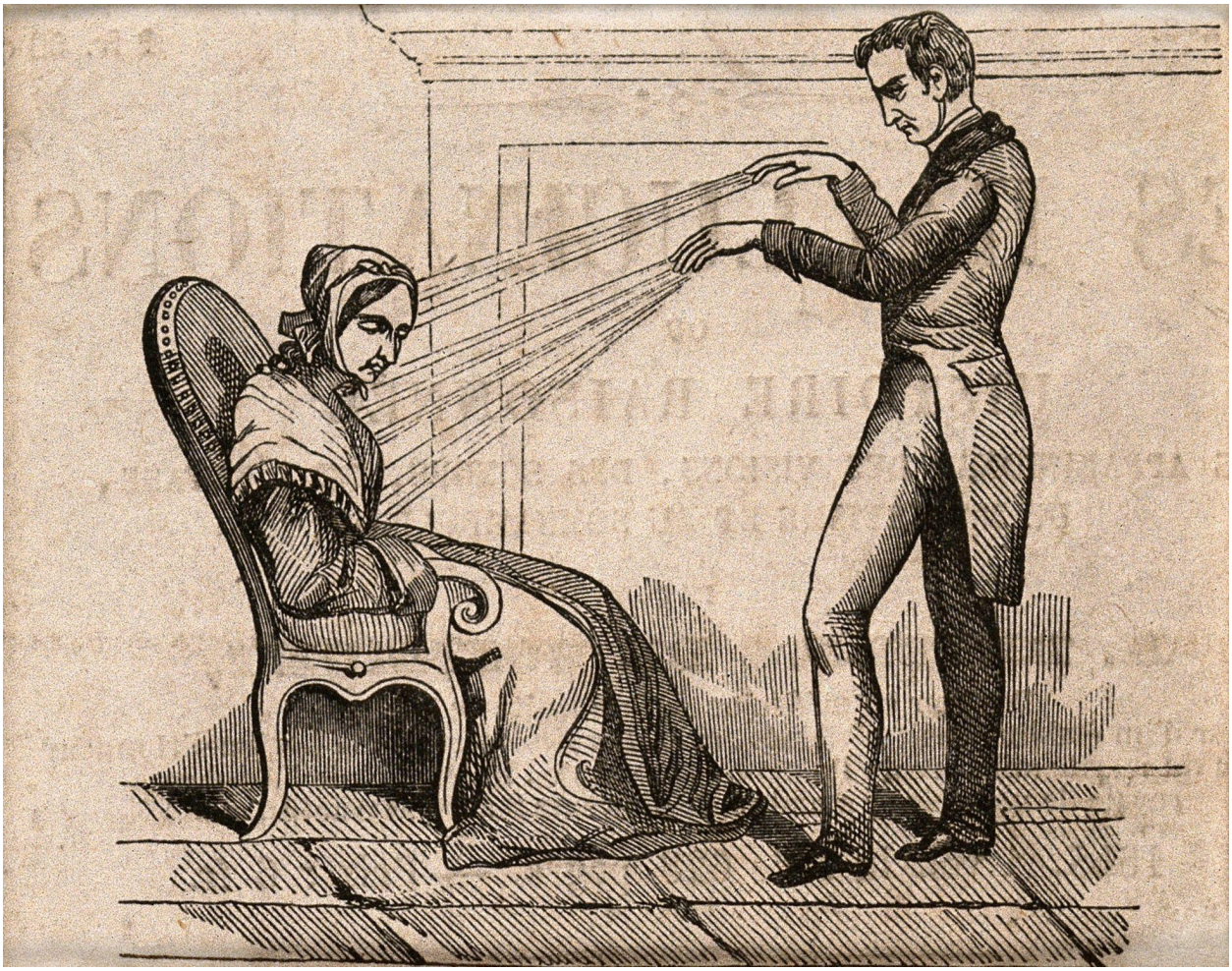

Figure 1. A Practitioner of Mesmerism using Animal Magnetism

Invoking or depending on the religious faith of the public within nineteenth century America, many Americans believed that the body and soul would succeed and falter simultaneously.[24] Desperate Americans flocked to Spiritualists to heal their medical needs as the Spiritualism movement promoted healing powers associated with "spiritualist doctors" affiliated with the ideology. These "doctors" would pull from the ideals of eighteenth century physician Anton Mesmer, who believed that the body was "governed by a magnetic fluid," and that, when an imbalance occurred, it "could cause

[24] *A Practitioner of Mesmerism Using Animal Magnetism*, c.1845, Wellcome Collection, https://jstor.org/stable/community.24835682.

all manner of ailments." All a practitioner had to do was move their hands over a client's body, and through their own "magnetism," the practitioner could realign the person's fluid and improve their overall health through "mesmerizing" the client.[25] Figure 1 above depicts this process in action by 1845 standards when this image was carved into wood.

Professor R. Laurence Moore notes within "The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America" that a serious illness and a miraculous recovery from it was just as notable to a medium as a college degree was to any professional, such as one involved in medical care.[26] Miss A.W. Sprague was under intense care from medical doctors homebound with illness for two consecutive years. After her sister miraculously allowed spirits to "speak through her," Sprague believed her fate would take her on to become a very successful medium. After this revelation, she "recovered sufficiently," and as her career evolved, so did her health as if by some miracle.[27] To many who heard about Miss Sprague's medical recovery, spirits were to thank for miraculously healing her condition and allowing her to become a notable medium of her time. It could be argued that many, like Sprague, possibly played into feminine notions of sensitivity to the other side to allow them the professional credentials required to sell medical advice to anyone seeking out answers and healing from the other side.

Women were able to not only charge individuals for services such as medical treatments and communing with the dead, but were able to give themselves financial

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[25] Katie Keckeisen and Karlena Barbosa, "Beyond the Veil: Spiritualism in the 19th Century," online exhibit, October 2018, https://www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Parks/OHenry/spiritualism.pdf.

[26] R. Laurence Moore, "The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1975): 200–221, https://doi.org/10.2307/2712342.

[27] Moore 218.

freedom through these ventures. During the nineteenth century in the United States, women were sought out by Americans trying to seek out how to commune with the spirits on the other side. Statistics show that the number of Spiritualists in the United States during Spiritualism's peak in the 1850s and 1860s was estimated to be from 45,000 to 11 million people with over half estimated to be women alone.[28] As author Claire Goodchild writes on page 37 of *The Book of Séances: A Guide to Divination and Speaking to Spirits*, "Performing as mediums meant that women were taking back ownership of their personhood."[29] The economy of Spiritualism was one of the few places where women (mostly white and working class in this context) had a voice that was respected by their male peers, and the services they offered allowed these women to have agency over who their clients were, over how much they would be profiting off of them, and over who or what had access to their bodies and voices.[30]

Not only was Spiritualism a direct route to individuality and equality for women, but it was also an emotional hub for Spiritualists and outsiders alike. After all, many women Spiritualists made a name for themselves and became financially secure thanks to playing off of the emotional state of their clientele. High death rates of young children and loved ones lost in the Civil War made many mothers and wives fall into a state of "perpetual bereavement" with grief simultaneously becoming more public thanks to Queen Victoria, who famously wore black for forty years after her husband's untimely death. Even the United States capital of Washington D.C. even began to experiment with Spiritualism and the social acceptance of grief. When Abraham and Mary Todd

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[28] Grossman 151.

[29] Goodchild 37.

[30] Goodchild 36-38.

Lincoln lost their son Willie to typhoid fever in 1862, Mary held séances in the White House to contact him.[31]

The culmination of these services offered by self-proclaimed Spiritualists and mediums led to what Richard Fink II of Temple University calls “the economy of the supernatural,” or an economic powerhouse of industry that revolved around communication with those on the other side.[32] It was through this revenue avenue that women, many possibly for the first time in their lineage, could begin to culminate a profit entirely their own without relying on their husbands, fathers, or immediate next male relative. Women’s economic independence ultimately led to women’s eventual emancipation from male dependency. The birth of the women’s suffrage movements only further fueled this fire as women sought to become recognized individuals in the growing United States.

Within the massive amount of followers of Spiritualism came to rise the women’s rights movement of the mid-nineteenth century in the United States. In the words of Claire Goodchild, “In the 1800s, spiritualism and feminism went hand in hand.”[33] Women within the Spiritualism movement set out into American society under one common goal: to emancipate women from the bonds of submissiveness within society. These Spiritualists agreed that women needed to be freed from the limited education

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[31] Grossman 151.

[32] Richard W. Fink II., "The Commercialization of the Afterlife: Spiritualism's Supernatural Economy, 1848–1900," Order No. 1475118, Temple University, 2010.

[33] Goodchild 36.

and societal opportunities offered to them as limited or no education or social interaction did nothing but limit the intellectual capabilities of a woman.[34]

The same year that the famous Fox sisters arrived in Rochester, New York, the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 commenced to discuss the social, civil, and religious rights of women. Being not widespread knowledge, it was within this convention that the conversation over women's rights, spirit rappings, and spiritual communication were discussed at the same table. For the first time, women were sitting alongside men and having theological discussions.[35] After the close of the Seneca Falls Convention, both the women's rights movement and Spiritualism intertwined ideologically as both social movements pushed for the redefining of societal norms within nineteenth century American society. Ann Braude, notable historian on Spiritualism and author of *Radical Spirits*, invokes a summary of both movements in that "Spiritualism became a major - if not *the* major - vehicle for the spread of women's rights ideas in mid-nineteenth century America."[36] A majority of the attendees at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention were men and women alike who proclaimed to be Spiritualists themselves. Their attendance to the Convention could possibly be used to explain why Spiritualism and the women's rights movement decided to take off around the same time as one another!

Spiritualist meetings saw the interweaving of ideals within the women's rights movement and Spiritualism and were a valuable asset to widely dispersing these ideals to the large crowds gathered to commune with the dead. Advertisements played a significant role in the American public between 1850 and 1920, and Spiritualists would

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[34] Braude 56.

[35] Goodchild 37.

[36] Braude 57.

often mass produce flyers to hang in public areas to advertise these spiritual meetings.[37] One such advertisement from 1871 invites “All friends of human progress” to attend, spiritualist or not.[38] With the reception and further disbursement of these ideals post-meeting, the women’s rights movement that started to bloom in the mid-nineteenth century in the United States quickly gained national attention in the hearts and minds of both men and women, most of them either devotees or admirers of spiritualism.

With mass meetings and social discussions over women’s rights becoming more and more widely seen and accepted, women suffragettes began pulling literature from key power players in the United States’ history that a majority of Americans could relate to. In a 1910 publication by suffragettes of the women’s rights movement, President Abraham Lincoln’s June 1836 letter to run for the Illinois state legislature is quoted within the advertisement as Lincoln had stated that he believed women deserved the right to vote.[39] "I go for all sharing the privileges of government who assist in bearing its burdens, by no means excluding women," was utilized within the women’s rights movement of the early twentieth century as President Lincoln was the one who had previously freed the enslaved of the United States.[40] Suffragettes saw an advantage to using this quote to support their movement as the abolition of slavery was something that had idealistically been shared between Spiritualism and women’s rights advocates

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[37] Goodchild 36.

[38] American Broadsides and Ephemera, “Spiritualist Mass Meeting,” advertisement, 1871.

[39] Abraham Lincoln to the Editor of the Sangamo Journal in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln: Volume I*. http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/.

[40] “Lincoln Said Women Should Vote,” The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, Seattle, Washington, 1910, http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/politics-reform/resources/suffragists-invoke-lincoln-1910.

for decades prior for the call for women to have the right to vote in the early twentieth century.

While Spiritualism did offer many outlets for women to become apparently independent within society, this is not to say that Spiritualism did not receive some backlash from feminists and the American counter public that opposed the call for the equality of the sexes. Suffragist Abigail Scott Duniway was quick to voice opposition towards mediums she felt were not being directed by spirits in an authentic manner, such as with Miss Sprague as discussed previously. Duniway was also not supportive of the Spiritualist movement in its entirety. However, Duniway did share a mutual respect with Spiritualists as they always invited her to speak on women's suffrage at their conventions.[41]

Many feminine suffragettes and women Spiritualists alike were cautioned to avoid speaking in public, even at the 1852 women's rights convention. During the nineteenth century in the United States, women audibly speaking in public was controversial as women were expected to be seen and not heard. A common ground did eventually bloom to fruition during the late nineteenth century as Spiritualism advocated fiercely in public forums for women's rights and the equality of women when compared to men. While not every feminist or male women's rights supporters were Spiritualists, it was very clear at the turn of the century that a majority of the advocates for women's rights supported Spiritualism and that all Spiritualists advocated in some way for women's rights.

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[41] Braude 96.

Surprisingly, however, women were not seen as threats to the patriarchy as women were already considered the “weaker sex,” and the characteristics that made them this way, such as nervousness, heightened sensitivity, and a delicate constitution, made them appear as the best candidates for mediumship as they were more in tune with the other side. In other words, women were believed to have one foot in this world and one foot in the next. During the nineteenth century and prior, women were considered not able to hold their tongue and were regarded as “gossips.”[42] What broke women away from this negative notion was the Spiritualism movement as women were not seen as responsible for the words communicated through them by spirits. Adding to this, many men at the time could not possibly believe that the women Spiritualists and mediums were making these words and phrases up as they felt the vocabulary and eloquence of the women’s speeches from the dead were far too intellectual for the mind of a woman.[43]

Alongside issues of women’s rights, Spiritualism also allowed many to question the frameworks of existing religions, such as Christianity within the context of nineteenth century America, in order to explore the “immortality of the soul.” The eighteenth century prior to Spiritualism’s birth saw philosophy come to life with many philosophers, like Emanuel Swedenborg, allowing Christians to imagine Heaven as not some lofty, far away land but rather another, better version of Earth where their deceased loved ones’ spirits lived on.[44] Spiritualism also attempted to offer concrete evidence to support proof

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[42] Gossip might not even mean talking about others as it could correlate to mean that women talk too much about anything.

[43] Braude 152.

[44] Keckeisen and Barbosa, 2018.

of the afterlife, which was unlike the “blind faith” expected by traditional religions like Christianity. Communication with the other side seemed to confirm that bodies were mere shells and that the spirit was what truly mattered.[45]

Spiritualists’ faith in their beliefs directly opposed that of Christianity as Spiritualism called for individuality over conformity. Spiritualism preached that universal truths were channeled directly to and through the individual seeking them out, which differed from the Christian faith that believed only God’s truth could come from the Bible, the church, or its ministers.[46] Individualism through Spiritualism ultimately allowed women to be seen as independent members of society. Within the frameworks of the established religion of Christianity, all parishioners, women ultimately, were dependent for spiritual knowledge to come from those considered divinely anointed i.e. priests, preachers, and clergy of the church.

Co-existing alongside this was the belief that participation within Spiritualism did not define the practitioners’ ultimate faith in their beliefs. Calling forth and/or communication with spirits was not considered mandatory as going to a séance or seeking out a fortune teller who communed with the dead was an entirely individual decision. On the contrary, church attendance was considered a definitive reflection over one’s devotion to and faith in God, and if one did not regularly attend church in nineteenth century America, they were considered to be not true believers in God and their faith unsteady. Attending church because it was expected and not due to an

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[45] Braude 151.

[46] Braude 57.

individual desire furthermore reinforced the notion that the person was a member of a collective and not an individual thinker for themselves and their desires.[47]

While many women were able to become successful business and socio-political members of their society through Spiritualism, it is not safe to assume that women Spiritualists did not face any exterior backlash when the morality behind Spiritualism was called into question. Spiritualism was supposed to offer comfort to the living and consolation that their beloved family members were still with them and able to be reached, heard from, and seen. However, many outsiders to Spiritualism began attempting to debunk the practice. As R. Laurence Moore penned May 1975, “A medium first of all faced the difficult task of establishing a reputation for honesty.”[48]

The biggest and most shocking dismantling of Spiritualism came in 1897 with the publication of *The Death Blow to Spiritualism*, which was a manuscript written by sisters Margaretta “Margaret” and Catherine “Kate” Fox and their interviewer, Reuben Briggs Davenport. The publication in question rocked the world of Spiritualism in the United States as the very sisters noted as being the founders of the movement revealed that everything had been faked in their quest for fame and fortune driven by their elder sister, Leah. The Fox sisters tried to defend themselves and said that they were children and did not realize they were deceiving others as they were “innocent to the thoughts of wrong.”[49] To make the publication seem even more legitimate and to sway Spiritualists from thinking someone was faking this confession, the Fox sisters signed their names at

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[47] Braude 57.

[48] Moore 201.

[49] Reuben Briggs Davenport, *The Death Blow to Spiritualism: Being the True Story of the Fox Sisters, as Revealed by Authority of Margaret Fox Kane and Catherine Fox Jencken*, (New York: G. W. Dillingham Co., Publishers, 1897), 13.

the beginning of the manuscript. The section entitled “Poetic Justice of the Exposure” on page thirteen powerfully begins stating “That the inventors of an infamous fraud should deal to its death-blow, is the poetic justice of fate. Over the creature, the creator has power of life and death. The creators of Spiritualism abjure its infamy. They decree its death. They condemn it to final destruction.”[50]

It is further revealed in the Fox sisters’ testimonies that the “spirit rappings” that had given birth to the Spiritualism movement of the nineteenth century were not a spirit at all but rather the girls’ clever trick of tying apple stems to strings that were dangled under the sheets of their bed and over the side of the bed. Whenever the spirit began to create these“rappings", the Fox sisters believed that no one would look at the bed as a source of the noise, and they turned out to be correct. Margaret stated that the apple trick was done by the girls prior to 1848 to scare their sister, Elizabeth, and to confuse their mother.[51] After the publication of this confession by the Fox sisters, many Spiritualists began to question their faith in Spiritualism, especially those women who had become household names and made economic gains in the American business scene.

The nineteenth century in the United States saw the boom of the Spiritualism movement, but by the early twentieth century and especially after the publication of *The Death Blow to Spiritualism*, the public outcry and demonizing of Spiritualism intensified. After the death of master magician and escape artist Harry Houdini in 1926, his wife, Beatrice or “Bess,” began to attempt to contact Houdini in the afterlife via séances. The two of them had previously made a pact that whoever died first had to attempt to

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[50] Davenport 14.

[51] Davenport 84-90.

contact the other from the other side. After ten years of failed attempts, Bess' efforts came to a close on October 31, 1936, which was the anniversary of her husband's death, when another failed séance led Mrs. Houdini to dismiss séances and the practices associated with Spiritualism and mediums entirely. Mrs. Houdini is mentioned in the November 2, 1936 *Evening Star* article as stating she had given up trying to contact her husband and would never engage in other séance.[52] The revelation by Bess Houdini, coupled with her late-husband's opposition to Spiritualists, sent Spiritualism into a downward spiral that it never recovered from.[53]

Whether or not one is a believer in Spiritualism, one cannot question the role the movement played in creating a public discourse and support for the equality of the sexes and rights for women. While the authenticity of Spiritualists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remains up for debate, there is no denying that Spiritualism facilitated some women becoming leaders in their communities, economically wealthy, and respected business women. That said, the questions remains, did female Spiritualists and their male counterparts actually believe in the immortality of the soul and that it was possible to communicate with those in the afterlife to aid the suffering of their living loved ones? Or, was the concept of "life after death" simply manipulated by female Spiritualists to gain access to wealth that would allow them to dictate the terms of their lives? Were those rappings in Hydesville, New York in 1848 the start of something spiritual, or one of the greatest scams in the history of the women's rights

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[52] "*Evening star.* (Washington, D.C.), 02 Nov. 1936." *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1936-11-02/ed-1/seq-5/>.

[53] More recent examples of falsehoods profited off of by self-proclaimed psychic mediums will be further analyzed within Chapter Two of this thesis.

movement in the United States? Much will be further revealed as Chapter Three calls forth the reader to go beyond the veil and into the twentieth century and beyond.

Chapter Three: "From Spiritualists to Swindlers: The Contradictory Transformation of Support for Spiritualism and Female Psychic Mediums in the United States Beginning in the Twentieth Century"

Women have long played significant roles in spiritual practices and psychic phenomena, both historically and in contemporary contexts. Within the United States, the invention of the "psychic" or "medium" has had its grip on Americans since the Fox Sisters first reported in 1848 that they could communicate with the spirits in their Rochester, New York home through "rappings." [54] While the belief in mediumship and self-proclaimed psychics has waxed and waned through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States, the séance, while still popular amongst some practicing mediums today, has been transformed into a new kind of entertainment. Alongside the entertainment factor, what once was a golden pedestal placed under the feet of psychic mediums in the United States has crumbled away thanks to public dismissal and scrutiny. What changed U.S. Americans' perspectives of psychic mediums, and why were they exalted before the postmodern era yet now condemned widely throughout the nation?

Many mediums in the United States have found quite an extensive level of fame, such as Theresa Caputo, the renowned "professional spirit medium" who interprets messages she says she receives from the spirits of the deceased. Caputo, like many women mediums who came before her, have contributed to allowing people to seek out

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[54] For the purposes of this research, both terms will be used as they appear simultaneously throughout the work analyzed and are often used interchangeably throughout the scholarship. See Emily Williams Kelly, PhD and Dianne Arcangel's "An Investigation of Mediums Who Claim to Give Information About Deceased Persons," for clear definitions for both "psychic" and "medium." https://med.virginia.edu/perceptual-studies/wp-content/uploads/sites/360/2016/12/KEL13JNMD-2011-Mediumship-Paper.pdf.

answers on the other side (for a price, of course).[55] However, with rising fame also comes rising public outcry with many attempting to solve just how Caputo can do what she so famously does (and for quite a hefty price tag as well). How she and many other psychic mediums have been able to be as successful as they are and were will be analyzed throughout this body of work alongside how quickly their climb to the top allowed them to publicly get onto the social rejection roller coaster.

From the beginning of Spiritualism to the present day, while many renowned Spiritualists, mediums, and psychics have been praised for their efforts, the public support for mediumship has declined, especially with further scientific exploration of the relationship between "the mind and brain." [56] The goal of this section of the thesis explores why mediumship was called into question during the nineteenth century and why, despite the accusations of falsehoods and frauds amongst self-proclaimed "mediums" and "psychics," many people then and today still choose to seek out psychic help. The legitimacy of psychic mediums has been a subject of much debate and skepticism since the inception of mediumship. Some people might genuinely believe in the abilities of psychic mediums to communicate with the deceased or to perceive information beyond the ordinary senses. Others, as will be seen throughout this text, view them as fraudulent or as practitioners of pseudoscience. It's essential to approach claims of psychic abilities with a critical mindset and to consider the lack of scientific evidence supporting these claims.

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[55] Cassandra White, "Validation, Comfort, and Syncretic Belief in the Afterlife: U.S. Viewers' Perceptions of *Long Island Medium*," *Anthropol Conscious*, 30: 90-112, 7 March 2019, accessed 17 April 2024, https://doi.org/10.1111/anoc.12108.

[56] Emily Williams Kelly, PhD, and Dianne Arcangel, MA, "An Investigation of Mediums Who Claim to Give Information About Deceased Persons," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, vol. 199, no. 1, (January 2011), Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, accessed 2 April 2024, https://med.virginia.edu/perceptual-studies/wp-content/uploads/sites/360/2016/12/KEL13JNMD-2011-Mediumship-Paper.pdf.

No matter if one were to view Spiritualism today or yesterday, one question raises itself into consideration: why do people even seek out communing with the deceased and/or answering questions about themselves from others? It could be argued that the reason Spiritualism got its rise during the mid-nineteenth century is the same reason why psychic mediums today are still making good money doing what they do: grief. Emily Williams Kelly and Dianna Arcangel published an article entitled “An Investigation of Mediums Who Claim to Give Information About Deceased Persons” within the 199th volume of *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* that delves into discussing mediumship tied to grief. To Kelly and Arcangel, “…, many bereaved people turn to mediums for help with their grief that they may not have found elsewhere.” [57] During the mid-nineteenth century, thousands of lives were lost during the American Civil War. In turn, many widows and loved ones of the deceased sought out psychic mediums to perform séances so that they might find closure in response to the deaths of those they loved.

From the mid-twentieth century to now, many have scientifically attempted to understand why so many people still believe in the concept of communing with the dead and finding answers from “the other side.” Dr. Neil Dagnall and Dr. Ken Drinkwater cite a US Gallup Survey which found that, “More than one-quarter of people believe humans have psychic abilities – such as telepathy and clairvoyance.” Both doctors explain how mediums and psychics use “The Barnum Effect,” which they describe as “a common psychological phenomenon whereby people tend to accept vague, general personality descriptions as uniquely applicable to themselves.” The name references the circus

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[57] Kelly and Arcangel, 2011.

man Phineas Taylor Barnum, who had a reputation as a master psychological manipulator.[58]

From here, they conclude that people who genuinely believe in the existence of psychic powers often gravitate towards three dimensions of belief. Recent studies suggest that people who believe in psychic powers think less analytically and that they tend to "interpret the world from a subjective personal perspective and fail to consider information critically." Believers also often view psychic claims as confirmatory evidence, or because someone who can "sense" things normal people cannot, they must be correct in what they say. Another factor that facilitates belief in psychic ability is the existence of scientific research that seems to support such beliefs. Research that is deemed scientific reinforces believers' views that claims psychics are genuine and real, according to Dagnall and Drinkwater.[59]

One notable difference between how people are able to receive assistance from psychics and mediums is the impact of technological advancements on the practice of investigating psychic phenomena. While Spiritualist mediums relied on in-person seances and printed publications to disseminate their messages, contemporary female psychics utilize digital platforms such as websites, social media, and streaming services to connect with clients and build their brands. This shift in communication technology has democratized access to psychic services while also raising questions about authenticity, privacy, and accountability in an increasingly virtual world. Can a person

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[58] Dr. Neil Dagnall and Dr. Ken Drinkwater, "The science of why so many people believe in psychic powers," *Manchester Metropolitan University*, 5 February 2019, accessed 2 May 2024, https://www.mmu.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/story/9435/.

[59] Dagnall and Drinkwater, 2019.

thousands of miles away from their client truly be able to tap into that living person's psyche in order to answer their questions and concerns?

Blake Ellis and Melanie Hicken's article "'Easy Prey': How a Massive Psychic Fraud Gained its Power" recounts what they deem to be "one of the largest consumer frauds in history."[60] Maria Duval, a famous French psychic, headed a scheme that "duped victims out of millions of dollars," using letters claiming to be from Maria herself. The article cites a woman named Chrissie whose mother, Doreen, lost at least $2,400 to this scam all while battling with her unknown Alzheimer's disease at the time. Chrissie convinced her mother that the letters from Maria were a terrible scam that was ultimately stealing her retirement savings. Ellis and Hicken quote Chrissie as saying regarding her mother,"She was shocked, dismayed, and ashamed when she realized her stupidity and the financial damage she'd caused herself." [61]

Dr. Peter Lichtenberg, a clinical psychologist and the director of Wayne State University's Institute of Gerontology, contends that "a combination of loneliness, depression, and a real sense of invisibility," led to many becoming victims to fraudulent psychics and mediums. People like Doreen fall into this category as she is cited as having struggled with Alzheimer's years before she knew she had it. Through her anger and frustration, Doreen sought help when all answers available to her seemed were not promising to her question of why she was suffering. According to Lictenberg, "Maria's victims are all over the world, but they have one thing in common: desperation." [62]

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[60] Blake Ellis and Melanie Hicken, "'Easy Prey': How a Massive Psychic Fraud Gained its Power," *CNN Wire Service,* 6 August 2018, https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/easy-prey-how-massive-psychic-fraud-gained-power/docview/2084302924/se-2.

[61] Ellis and Hicken, 2018.

[62] Ellis and Hicken, 2018.

Desperation for closure or to answer life's often "unanswerable" questions is not a postmodern invention; it has been in existence before Spiritualism's start in the mid-nineteenth century. Desperation has often led to many seeking out psychic mediums instead of arguably more preferred methods of getting answers, such as through scientific or medical means. Dr. Sanborn, "one of the best Clairvoyants in the country," during the nineteenth century proclaimed that through the "Mesmeric state," he could locate the source of *all* diseases, the condition the disease was in, and could prescribe remedies for these afflictions all while being able to supposedly tune in to the feelings of the patient.[63] Going into a trance or "Mesmeric" state is common throughout many facets of mediumship, yet often, there is science and psychology behind it, not sheer spiritual properties held or not held by the practitioner.[64]

Emily Williams Kelly and Dianna Arcangel's research focuses on the relationship between the mind and the brain, and they contend that research must be undertaken to understand if mediums can truly commune with the dead to assist individuals with choosing to approach a medium or not and the criteria to look for regarding a "legit" medium. To Kelly and Arcangel, "Because most of the best mediums of the past gave readings while they were in a trance state, the interest in mediumship among early psychical researchers was part of a larger interest in dissociative phenomena." [65] After analyzing the evidence, they found that most self-proclaimed mediums and psychics are

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[63] *Read this clairvoyance, mesmerism and psychology combined. ... Dr. Sanborn, one of the best clairvoyants in the county…,* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Portsmouth, N.H.] Portsmouth Daily Chronicle Job Printing Office, [between 1865 and 1875, 1865), *Readex: American Broadsides and Ephemera, Series I*, https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/readex/doc?p=ABEA&docref=image/v2%3A10D2F64C960591AE%40EAIX-10F455D56255C798%4022863-%401.

[64] For more information on "Mesmerism," see Chapter Two, page 11.

[65] Kelly and Arcangel 12.

able to convince their clients of the supernatural capabilities thanks to fishing for information or “cold reading.”

“Cold reading” is described by Kelly and Arcangel as an approach taken by psychic mediums involving making vague or general statements in relation to their clients’ questions and using their responses as clues “to further refine and focus those vague statements.” The medium’s statements are so general or vague that they can apply to many people or be interpreted in a variety of ways by different sitters. A client walking away stating that a meeting with a psychic or medium was successful is simply “the result of chance, arbitrary selection of statements, and over-interpretation on the part of a sitter biased by grief or wishful thinking.” [66] On the contrary, “hot reading” entails getting information in advance about people they know they will meet, through sources such as Facebook and other various social platforms.[67]

Considering concepts like cold reading, how the economically-charged system of Spiritualism manifested into its present state has continued alongside similar patterns of “channeling,” whether it be authentic or the opposite. Suzanne Giesemann, a self-identified medium, wrote on her website that she needs to feed off of her clients’ energies so that she can pivot within the questioning if she was not correct in her initial read. To psychologist Paige Whitley, “If her client sits there silent, there will be an energy blockade and she won’t be able to read the spirits.” [68] Drawing back on Kelly and Arcangel’s conclusions, since the line of questioning is so generic, when a medium

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[66] Kelly and Arcangel, 16.

[67] Paul Thagard, Ph.D, “Should You Believe in Psychics? Psychology and logic join forces to debunk psychics,” *Psychology Today*, 2019 April 24, accessed 2 May 2024, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hot-thought/201904/should-you-believe-in-psychics.

[68] Paige Whitley,“Psychic Mediums,” *The Psychology of Extraordinary Beliefs, The Ohio State University*, 8 March 2018, accessed 15 April 2024, https://u.osu.edu/vanzandt/2018/03/08/psychic-mediums-2/.

is inaccurate, they are able to backtrack and correct themselves. The generic questions and/or statements mediums impose upon their clients could apply to almost anyone, and this is why psychic mediums are able to "reach out for help to understand a message they are receiving from a spirit." [69]

Generic questioning and statements have led many people to become swindled financially from proclaimed psychic mediums. Because people choose to believe what they desire, many modern Spiritualists in the twenty-first century take advantage of this notion, charging ridiculous fees for answers that could potentially apply to many (if not all) situations. For example, a woman that went by "Psychic Zoe" was arrested for fraud in New York after telling a client that if they did not buy her a "9.2-carat diamond ring," they would never find love. As seen with many false psychics preying on the vulnerable, the victim spent more than $700,000 on a diamond ring. Humorously, the speaker Rachel Martin attests that if Psychic Zoe truly were psychic, "you would think she'd have known they were coming." [70]

In August of 2012, federal prosecutors charged elderly Boca Raton millionaire, Peter Wolofsky, with aiding a "Fort Lauderdale family of psychics" in laundering funds from clients that accused the family of "fleecing" them. After Wolofsky was proven innocent, the nine members of the Marks family on trial demanded that federal prosecutors return "hundreds of pieces of jewelry and other property seized from their homes, safe deposit boxes and a storage unit," that had been confiscated from the family after their arrests in 2011. The Marks family had gone to trial after being accused

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[69] Whitley, 2018.

[70] Rachel Martin, "New York Police Arrest Psychic Zoe for Fraud," *Morning Edition*, Washington, D.C.: NPR, 2018, https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/other-sources/new-york-police-arrest-psychic-zoe-fraud/docview/2038361088/se-2.

of “operating a multi-million-dollar fraud on clients” in Fort Lauderdale, Florida and across the street from Manhattan’s financially-influential hotel The Plaza.[71] The woman behind the fraud, Rose Marks, also implicated three other members of her family involving the same crime a year later in 2013. Rose Marks' only daughter, Rosie Marks, Rosie’s husband, Donnie Eli of Fort Lauderdale, and her younger sister, Victoria Eli had all pleaded guilty to their crimes as of November 2013 when Paula McMahon’s second article was written.[72]

The United States market for “psychic services” is worth about $2 billion annually, according to market researcher IBISWorld. Because psychics are not licensed or overseen by any government agency, they can coerce the law to act within their means whenever their business practices “lean more toward greed than growth.” Shay Parker, founder of Best American Psychics, an online directory of seers who reportedly undergo testing and criminal background checks, stated that a true psychic will offer highly specific information without any prompting, such as with the name of a deceased family member or a detailed physical description.[73] If one were to be ascertained by a psychic medium to pay up front for answers from the deceased, they should essentially run in the opposite direction. To Parker,“No psychic can make someone do something.” [74]

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[71] Paula McMahon, “Feds Drop Charge Against Millionaire Accused in Psychic Fraud Case,” *McClatchy - Tribune Business News,* 3 August 2012, https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/feds-drop-charge-against-millionaire-accused/docview/1030788644/se-2.

[72] Paula McMahon, “Three More Members of South Florida 'Psychic' Fraud Family Sentenced,” *McClatchy - Tribune Business News,* 5 November 2013, https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/three-more-members-south-florida-psychic-fraud/docview/1448297688/se-2.

[73] David Lazarus,“How to tell if a psychic is more interested in cash than clairvoyance,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 May 2017, accessed 29 April 2024, https://www.latimes.com/business/lazarus/la-fi-lazarus-psychic-scams-20170523-story.html.

[74] Lazarus, 2017.

David Lazarus' article entitled, "How to Tell if a Psychic is More Interested in Cash Than Clairvoyance," gives readers a step-by-step approach to making sure they do not get swindled by self-proclaimed psychics and mediums. Lazarus recounts the story of Joyce Senfe who sought out a psychic to see if her husband would return after he left her after fifty-six years of marriage. After locating a Christian psychic based in Los Angeles by the name Psychic Readings by Lauren, this woman told Joyce how her husband would return but needed to rid himself of "evil spirits" first. This service, Lauren admitted, could be done professionally by her for the small sum of $900. As your assumptions are probably wondering, no, Joyce's husband had not come back by the time Lazarus had written his article, and now Joyce is hitting "a brick wall" trying to get a refund. [75]

Even though psychic mediums raise a plethora of initial red flags as has been discussed previously, why do people still believe in them? Better yet, how and why did Spiritualism transform itself within public opinion? Many Spiritualists of the nineteenth century, such as the Fox Sisters and Madame La Branch as previously mentioned, were widely renowned and publicly praised for their efforts in communing with the dead. With the dawn of the twentieth century, however, two methods arose that directly sought to explain and ultimately call out if these women were in fact spiritualists, or in fact swindlers. One was the increase in scientific exploration of the psyche and psychological societal traits and practices, and the other dealt directly with public examples of "calling out" and condemning said psychics and mediums.

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[75] Lazarus, 2017.

Beginning as early as 1852, Charles Wyllys Elliott set out to explain Spiritualism and mediumship to a broad set of Americans in an effort to dissuade individuals in seeking out the help of psychic mediums. Elliott cited a medical doctor named Charles H. Lee in order to debunk the "spirit rappings," or "Rochester Rappings," at the home of the Fox Sisters.[76] Doctor Lee researched sound and how auditory nerves can make one believe that a sound is coming from one place when it is actually coming from near oneself, or vice versa. He understood the distance of sound to be an "acquired perception" and that "If the sounds, then, be produced under circumstances where the same impression is made on both ears, or auditory nerves, then we are wholly unable to designate from what quarter they come." [77] Lee states rather boldly that while he is only trying to debunk the "Rochester Rappings" for scientific research, could his methodological findings be somewhat skewed due to his own biases? After all, Lee's excerpt closed with the phrase regarding the rappings in that they have "been productive of much evil in the community," thereby dismissing the Fox Sisters as nothing more than frauds preying upon the vulnerable.

In more recent years, other medical professionals have expanded upon the research Doctor Lee began in 1852 regarding how the human auditory system functions in relation to believing or not believing supposed supernatural occurrences. M. Vince, PhD conducted research in 2021 on how unusual auditory experiences could explain why many people truly believe they can hear and/or speak to the dead. Vince

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[76] Charles Wyllys Elliott, *Mysteries, or, Glimpses of the supernatural, containing accounts of the Salem witchcraft, the Cock-lane ghost, the Rochester rappings, the Stratford mysteries, oracles, astrology, dreams, demons, ghosts, spectres, &c. &c.*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1852), *Sabin Americana: History of the Americas, 1500-1926*, accessed 12 April 2024, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CY0100061119/SABN?u=viva_wm&sid=bookmark-SABN&xid=6380b061&pg=1.

[77] Elliott 153.

conducted said research using individuals who ascribed to the practice of Spiritualism and those who did not. Specifically, Vince hypothesized that religious and spiritual experiences, or "RSEs," such as clairaudience,[78] could be useful as a comparison to auditory hallucinations of people with certain mental health conditions. His results concluded that those in the Spiritualist group were more prone to absorption from both spiritual and non-spiritual auditory hallucinations than the general population group. Ultimately, the research concluded that people were more likely to become interested in the paranormal as a consequence of some unusual sensory experience, such as seeing ghosts or potentially hearing voices call to them from the great beyond.[79]

Charles Wyllys Elliott is noted as writing the following metaphor to describe the relationship between the medium and persons seeking them out: "Is it not asking too much of the spider that he shall forgive the hawk! Let the hawk then be wary of the spider." [80] Public critiques and the attempted debunking of psychic and medium practices is one of the main methods many use in order to regain some sense of control when it comes to dealing with the effects psychic mediumship can have on human emotion. Throughout his work, Elliott references mediums only within quotation marks, possibly revealing Elliott's own biases towards his disbelief in mediumship. For starters, Elliott had gone to visit the famous Fox Sisters, who are noted as being the unofficial "founders" of the Spiritualism movement in the United States after they reported being able to talk to spirits through rapping noises. The Fox Sisters were "much amused at my

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[78] "Clairaudience" is defined by Vince as meaning "unusual auditory experiences." See https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/what-can-science-tell-us-about-mediums-who-hear-voices.

[79] M. Vince, Ph.D, "What can science tell us about mediums who hear voices?" *Medical News Today*, 23 January 2021, accessed 2 May 2024, https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/what-can-science-tell-us-about-mediums-who-hear-voices.

[80] Elliott 145.

eagerness and readiness to believe," and Elliott noted how upon inquiring as to the state of his friend, not only did the "spirit" get his friend's name wrong but also alluded to their connection with a ship and that they were indeed dead. All of these are revealed by Elliott as being false and in one way the truth.[81]

Elliott also cites a Mrs. Norman Culver, who allegedly claimed to be related to the Fox Sisters through marriage. After multiple visits to their home in Rochester, New York, she began to see things that made her "suspect that they were deceiving" many of their clientele and believers of their practice in the United States.[82] Mrs. Norman Culver admitted to being taught when to touch Catherine Fox's arm after the correct letter was rapped when the sisters "consulted the spirits," and was promised by the sisters that she could become a medium too after they explained how to conduct herself as one. Also, those "spirit rappings" the girls reported hearing? The lady in question disclosed how these rappings were made by tapping one's toes inside their shoes.

"After nearly a week's practice, with Catherine showing me how, I could produce them perfectly myself," she stated to Elliott.[83] If one wanted to make the raps sound like they were occurring on the table, one needed to rap their toes onto the table's leg. If the raps were to occur in the distance, the rapping of toes needed to be louder and the rapper must direct their own ears to the spot where they wished them to be heard.[84] Catherine Fox also told Mrs. Culver that in order to answer a client's questions correctly, the easiest method in doing so would be to ask the spirits for the answer in alphabetical

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[81] Elliott 150.

[82] Elliott 160.

[83] Elliott 161.

[84] Elliott 162.

form, not in words or phrases. Alongside this, having the client write down several names on paper and point to each as they waited for the spirits to “rap” allowed the sisters “to watch the countenance and motions of the person,” allowing the “mediums” to guess right almost every time. [85] While Mrs. Culver’s exposing of the Fox Sisters in 1852 sparked a fire of public discontent for psychic mediums, the apparent negative reaction towards Spiritualism that would intensify in the twentieth century would “set a blaze” faster than one could keep up with.

A newsletter called the *Spiritualist* was regularly printed and included not only advice on how to practice Spiritualism at home and advertisements for psychics, clairvoyants, and mediums alike but also allowed critiques of mediumship to come to life in print. One such issue from 1872 saw an account from a John Beattie after experiencing what the *Spiritualist* newsletter calls “trance mediumship.” The unnamed young man had just lost his wife from childbirth complications and wanted answers to see if she was at peace. Beattie takes the man to an unnamed medium who appears to dramatically reenact the process of someone dying after calling forth multiple people, including a French soldier, Beattie’s own parents, and other unnamed deceased French speakers. Even though the young man seemed to be persuaded by this reenactment, Beattie, on the other hand, does not buy the notion because to him, “the scene was intensely real, and yet difficult to realize.” [86]

By the time the medium called forth the young man’s wife, they are noted as having taken the man’s wedding ring and stated that the deceased man’s wife “...cannot

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[85] Elliott 162.

[86] “No.40, November 15 1872,” *Spiritualist*, n.d, https://jstor.org/stable/community.27561734.

get you to acknowledge her," after which the man proclaimed that it *must* be his wife. Appeased by this answer, the medium recounts to the young man that "I am happy; tell my dear one not to grieve" as if to speak for his deceased wife, after which the medium moves on to being possessed by another spirit. With the only replies from the "wife" being general, vague statements, myself and Beattie seem to believe that the medium was not exactly calling forth the actual wife but rather offering solace to a grieving man. As Beattie noted, ""The scene itself was a short but intensely dramatic poem…" which could be interpreted to mean that the medium was there to provide some semblance of an answer to help the young man move on.[87] Even though it is likely the medium did not actually contact the wife, they did allow their customer to depart the séance with some peace of mind and heart. Therefore, even though many mediums are contended as being frauds, can we demonize them all if they are only trying to ease the suffering of others? For a profit, of course.

Not only were average Americans voicing their distaste and disbelief in psychic mediumship during the twentieth century, but the problem with swindling psychics even reached federal attention lawfully and from a surprise guest to our historiography. Master magician and escape artist Harry Houdini set out in 1926 for Washington, D.C. in order to speak out against a bill that sought to regulate mediums, fortune tellers, and astrologers in Washington D.C. Famously called the "arch foe of Spiritualists" in the *Washington Times*, Houdini had been a long time believer that all mediums were con artists preying on the emotions of others and wished to see mediums prohibited in

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[87] *Spiritualist*, https://jstor.org/stable/community.27561734.

indulging in Spiritualist communications.[88] According to Houdini, spiritual occurrences could easily be debunked as simply being tricks played to deceive the public.[89]

It was at the February and May 1926 Congressional hearings for the Subcommittee on the Judiciary of the Committee on the District of Columbia that Houdini was called to testify as a witness to the deception of mediums and fortune tellers alike; a calling that made front page news for the months in between the 1926 hearings.[90] Houdini went so far as to begin to call out mediums within the very room, especially Madam Marcia, the fortune teller and clairvoyant whose clientele included Supreme Court justices, Congressmen, and even the first lady of the time, Florence Harding.[91] However, as noted by the February 20, 1926 *Washington Times*, spiritualists, clairvoyants, and fortune tellers flocked to the hearings to defend their practices before Houdini and the Committee. Spiritualists especially made the point that they wished to be considered separate from fortune tellers as they saw Spiritualism as a religious faith, which would therefore allow them to be protected under the Constitutional right to freedom of religion.[92]

Psychology in its earlier formations attempted to publicly debunk psychics and mediums as being shams and false in their endeavors. In 1863, a Professor Wickes of

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[88] "*The Washington Times*. (Washington [D.C.]), 20 Feb. 1926." *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026749/1926-02-20/ed-1/seq-12/>.

[89] "Bill to Regulate Mediums Develops Uproarious Hearing." *Washington Post* (Washington, DC), February 27. 1926.

[90] "*The Washington Times*, (Washington [D.C.]), 20 Feb. 1926," *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress.

[91] Heather Thomas, "Harry Houdini Goes to Washington," (21 August 2018), https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2018/08/harry-houdini-goes-to-washington/.

[92] "*The Washington Times*, (Washington [D.C.]), 20 Feb. 1926."

New York was advertised in a Vermont newspaper as giving a lecture on “Psychology and Medical Electricity, Spirit Rappings, etc.,” which was an attempt to discredit women who were allegedly communicating with the dead and that the “rappings” heard by spirits was all just a trick of the mind. To Wickes, there was no spirit at all but rather the mind’s belief that there were spirits attempting to communicate with the living that enabled many female spiritualists to become successful mediums. While the women writing this article seem most eager to believe Wickes, they are also simultaneously supporting his idea that “magnetic electricity” can heal the minds of the sick. Arguably, Wickes’ belief in electric medicine is an early precursor to electroshock therapy that would plagued many mental institutions in the early twentieth century: a form of “medicine” that is arguably more barbaric and harmful to one’s psyche rather than the rappings of a spirit in one’s home. While Wickes did not directly quote notable Spiritualists or the ideologies of the movement, the overall tone of the article attempts to use “medical science” to disband the notion that women could speak to the dead, inevitably calling them crazy.[93]

The nineteenth century in the United States saw the boom of the Spiritualism movement, but the twentieth and twenty-first centuries saw its demise. Spiritualism was supposed to offer comfort to the living and consolation that their beloved family members were still with them and able to be reached, heard from, and seen. As seen in the present day and from the evidence examined, many people condemn the practice of

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[93] “Spirit Rappings Explained,” *Montpelier Daily Journal* (Montpelier, VT), 1863, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.wm.edu/iw-search/we/Evans/?p_product=EAIX&p_theme=eai&p_nbid=V6BJ65IYMTcwMjkwNjIxNy44MTM2OjE6MTQ6MTI4LjIzOS45OS4xNDA&p_action=doc&p_queryname=1&p_docref=v2:10D2F64C960591AE@EAIX-10F4545EE7AC1508@11587-@1.

mediums, psychics, and clairvoyants, yet many still confide in these practitioners and fully believe in their expertise. Believing in the power to commune with the deceased and also figure out answers from one's own supernatural psyche will depend on a variety of factors within a person, such as morals, religious beliefs, and due to a method known as due to "motivated reasoning." [94]

According to Paige Whitley from Ohio State University, "Mediumship is very hard to measure, and mediumship is very hard to disprove; therefore, people will support it." To Whitley, people want to believe in mediumship because there is confirmation that there is alleged life after death, and they might seek out psychic mediums to find out if their loved ones that have died are doing well and watching over them, just like my own mother. With the rise of popularity of psychic mediums within American popular culture, it seems more acceptable to believe in the supernatural than not. John Oliver's February 24, 2019 edition of *Last Week Tonight* found that "4 out of 10 people believe that psychics are effective," and that billions of dollars are spent yearly by people desperate to have psychics help them with their problems.[95] Theresa Caputo has made millions off of her practice of spirit mediumship, earning her not only a television show, *Long Island Medium*, but also international praise and scrutiny over her methodology.[96] I would argue that *Long Island Medium* revamped a social appreciation for mediumship that had been going through the ringer for decades prior, but that is a different paper for a different day.

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[94] Thagard, 2019.

[95] Whitley, 2018.

[96] Cassandra White, "Validation, Comfort, and Syncretic Belief in the Afterlife: U.S. Viewers' Perceptions of *Long Island Medium*," *Anthropol Conscious*, 30: 90-112, 7 March 2019, accessed 17 April 2024, https://doi.org/10.1111/anoc.12108.

Some, like psychologist Paul Thagard, PhD, believe that “there are no known physical mechanisms by which people could communicate with the dead or foresee the future.” [97] It is not the position of this paper to prove or disprove the validity of every single psychic, medium, and/or clairvoyant in the United States today. Several modern Spiritualists could or could not be authentic. As science stands now, there is no factual way to prove if someone can truly speak to the dead and answer unknown questions about others. The belief in spiritual matters has progressed alongside other societal methods of categorization, such as with science in the case of this body of research.

People today tend to believe in psychics as being all-powerful truth sayers for a variety of reasons. Whether to gain clarity to feel better about an issue, the belief that psychics know information not known by others, or from responses to seeing psychic mediums on American daytime television like with Theresa Caputo, people still choose to believe. Even mediumship has been called into question since the nineteenth century and why despite these notions of falsehoods amongst self-proclaimed “mediums” and “psychics,” many people then and today still choose to seek out psychic help.

Why people choose to believe in psychic mediumship is their business and varies from person to person. Despite the temporal and cultural differences between the Spiritualism movement and contemporary psychic phenomena today, certain themes and patterns persist across both contexts. Women continue to occupy significant roles in spiritual practices and psychic endeavors, leveraging their intuitive abilities and empathic skills to provide guidance and support to others. However, women in both eras

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[97] Thagard, 2019.

have also faced challenges and criticisms, ranging from accusations of fraud and exploitation to struggles for recognition and autonomy in male-dominated spaces.

In conclusion, the experiences of women in the Spiritualism movement of the nineteenth century and female psychics in the contemporary United States offer valuable insights into the intersections of gender, spirituality, and cultural dynamics. While the contexts of psychic practice have evolved over time, women continue to play integral roles in mystical and spiritual endeavors, navigating complex social, economic, and technological landscapes. By examining the continuities and changes between these two periods, we gain a deeper understanding of the enduring influence of women in shaping the realm of the supernatural and the quest for meaning in human existence.

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