ONE

Mourning, Media, and the Cultural Politics of Conjuring the Dead

From his snug home in an atmosphere in which pianos float, “soft warm hands” bud forth from vacant space, and lead pencils write alone, the spiritualist has a right to feel a personal disdain for the “scientific man” who stands inertly aloof in his pretentious enlightenment.

WILLIAM JAMES

“Sargent’s Planchette,” 1869

In the last third of the nineteenth century, as William James and many of his contemporaries mourned the ability of religion and science to function as mutually productive explanatory systems, the movement calling itself Modern American Spiritualism promised “an experimental science,” affording “the only sure foundation for a true philosophy and a pure religion.” At a time when science was meant to have pushed religion to the cultural margins, and when the forces of positivism, realism, and rationality should have washed magic from the world, this practice offered a popular religion buttressed by scientific “evidence” of human immortality. A half century after the inception of Spiritualism, William James would find the divide between religion and science intolerable and irrational. As a response, he eventually founded the American Society for Psychical Research with some of the most prominent scientists of the day, to investigate the paranormal using scientific methods. For a much larger, diverse set of Americans, Spiritualism supplied the language and technology to test the unseen boundary between this world and the next.

Spiritualism called into question not only the categories of religion and
Figure 1. “Seated woman with ‘spirit’ of a young man,” ca. 1885. Unknown maker, American School, active 1880s. Catalog no. 84.XP.447.1. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Spirit photographs, in which a spirit double appeared as a whispery image within a traditional portrait, were nineteenth-century memento mori, cherished objects in which the living and the dead were reunited through the magic and manipulations of photography. Most of these images, like those by the photographer William Mumler (shown in figures 2, 5, 6, and 10 and discussed in chapter 3), were made as infinitely reproducible paper visiting cards. This is a rare example of a tintype spirit photograph. Neither the photographer nor the subjects pictured are known.
science but also the divide between the living and the dead, giving nineteenth-century Americans unique access to the afterlife and the possibility of communing with departed loved ones. It thus posed a counterdiscourse to both an aging Calvinism and a growing materialism. Spiritualism extended the promise of a gentle, supermundane afterlife. The Other Side, or the Summerland, as it was often called, was imaginable, familiar, and attainable. This vision held enormous appeal, and Spiritualism was, in the words of one historian, “ubiquitous on the American scene at mid-century.”

Spiritualism’s appeal was as diverse as the many practitioners it attracted. As the historian Ann Braude has argued, women played particularly important roles in the movement as mediums and speakers, often crafting a specifically feminized, and sometimes overtly feminist, spiritual practice. For many Spiritualists, small-group communalism took the place of institutionalized religion; alternative healing replaced male-dominated medicine; and the voices of priests and ministers were drowned out by those of the spirits themselves. Many Spiritualists denied basic categorical binaries: the distinctions between men and women, science and magic, life and afterlife, the past and the present. They repudiated the power of experts and the necessity of mediating hierarchies at a time in which these forces were taking on a renewed cultural importance.

Nineteenth-century Spiritualists were predominantly middle-class Anglo-Americans of a very specific historical moment. Although they were never of a single political mind, their convictions grew from an optimistic perfectionism and the belief that the world could be radically remade. Indeed, all around them, on a daily basis, nineteenth-century America was being transformed. Concurrent with the birth of modern Spiritualism, as one believer explained, was “the demand for exact justice and equal rights for the sexes. The same impulse was moving the world in a determined moral protest against the institution of human slavery. Under the same divine impetus the theological authority which was the bulwark of despotism was analyzed and criticized in a manner and degree which no previous period would have tolerated.” Spiritualism was born of an era of enormous social change and fervent antiauthoritarian impulses.

Yet Spiritualism was more than an antiauthoritarian antinomianism; it was a unique practice centered on communication with the spirits of the dead. A specter of the once-living materialized into being, a ghost is a visitation from the past to the present. Given that tens of thousands of Americans took to the séance table to commune with spirits, it is worth asking why, in certain historical moments, people need to speak with the past. Why, in the
middle and late nineteenth century, did Americans want to converse with their dead ancestors, to look backward as they strove forward? And, beyond their desire to do so, why did they imagine that they could?

In some ways, Spiritualism bears similarities to the most radical, anticlerical strains of Protestantism in the nineteenth century: it too sought to make religious hierarchy and expertise obsolete. Yet Spiritualism also took the concept of mediation literally, at once transforming ordinary Americans into spiritual mediums and transfiguring new forms of information and technological media into the means of the movement’s proliferation. Moreover, it was popularized in an era when anything seemed possible, when speaking to the dead may have seemed no less strange than communicating across cables or capturing the living on film. Like freezing an image on a photographic plate, the Spiritualists’ ghost catching was a collapsing of time: the past preserved in the present for the future. To view this nineteenth-century religion from a contemporary vantage, then, is to engage with emergent technologies and inexplicable occurrences, modern vision and phantasmic visions.8

The revelations of modern science provided new language for spiritual communication, but Spiritualists’ embrace of technology was more than mere analogy. Samuel Morse’s electrical telegraph was introduced in 1844, four years before the Fox sisters’ invention.9 Spirit rapping was almost immediately dubbed the “spiritual telegraph,” as was one of the first Spiritualist newspapers, which extended the metaphor as it spread the news. In a literalization of what the critic Jeffrey Sconce has termed “haunted media,” the Spiritualist press was driven by the information-gathering power of contributing mediums as well as worldly editors. During the Civil War, “spirit helpers” played an important role as Spiritualist newspapers competed with one another to disseminate information about battles and war dead faster and, arguably, more accurately than the mainstream press could promise.10 Even Thomas Watson, the famed assistant to Alexander Graham Bell, experimented with the telephone as an aid to spiritual communication.11 Nineteenth-century phenomena such as spiritual telegraphy, automatic writing, and spectral photography functioned as new media; at the same time, Spiritualists understood their own embodied religious practices and practitioners as media. Spiritualist media and performance were not merely attendant to the religion, a way to get out the word: mediation was Spiritualist practice itself. The medium’s bodily transformation in the séance circle was an individual experience collectively mobilized.

Mediums extrapolated the new ability to communicate across land and water via wires and cables to a link across time itself. Spiritualist communic-
tion became more than either popular science or an amusing parlor game: it functioned as a powerful means of connection, offering grieving Americans an outlet for mourning. Collective consolation, as well as disparate personal longings for community, however, gave rise to another voice within Spiritualism, one that renewed the call for utopian reform and reimagined the obligations of citizenship in this world.

After situating Spiritualism within antebellum mourning cultures, this chapter illustrates the ways in which the sense of collectivity forged by consolation, in presence and in print, opened a path to interconnected political practices. While tracing Spiritualists’ broad involvement in myriad personal, social, and political reform movements of the nineteenth century, I ground Spiritualist politics in Spiritualists’ own unique relationships to dying and to the dead. Untangling the relationship between mourning and social change on the one hand and a rising consumer culture and middle-class sensibility on the other, this chapter charts the ways in which, in this moment, mourning became militancy.

Consolation and Connection

In some ways, Spiritualist media predated Spiritualist mediums. More precisely, the popular religion that became known as American Spiritualism was rapidly disseminated by an existing group of skilled writers, editors, and lecturers who came of age during the mesmeric movement that laid the intellectual groundwork for its successor. At the same time, Spiritualism grew out of American Victorian mourning cultures that were themselves made manifest through new markets in commercialized memento mori and flourishing print media. This particular confluence of markets and media contributed to the movement’s explosive growth and widespread circulation. Within a few short years following the Fox sisters’ “Rochester Rappings,” the Spiritualist press became a community in print, linking disparate local spirit circles into a national network.

The Shekinah, one of the first Spiritualist newspapers, included pages of letters from readers to the editor, Samuel B. Brittan, asking for comfort, consolation, and sometimes assistance in contacting dead loved ones. Likewise, beginning in the late 1850s, the Spiritualist newspaper The Banner of Light published a regular column, “The Messenger,” which included communications to readers from the spirits of the dead through the mediumship of Mrs. J. H. (Fannie) Conant, whose services were engaged “exclusively for the Banner of Light.” Some mourners directed their letters personally to well-
known Spiritualists. Judge John Worth Edmonds of the Supreme Court of New York became a prominent spokesman for the spiritual cause when, mourning his wife’s death, he approached the nation’s first medium, Margaret Fox, to help him make contact with his deceased spouse. After attending séances led by the Fox sisters, Edmonds converted to Spiritualism; he resigned from his final post on the New York Court of Appeals in 1853 to devote himself fully to spreading the spiritual news.15

In 1853, the Shekinah published an exchange between Edmonds, described as “one of our most distinguished citizens,” and a woman identified only as “an intelligent lady at the South.” She wrote to Edmonds because she knew that “he too had lost a spirit mate.” Edmonds answered one of her letters with the assurance that “the intelligent lady’s” dead mate was still with her: “Believe me, if you have in the Spiritual World one dearer you than life, he is ever around and near you, watching over and guarding you, conscious of your every thought, rendered more happy by every evidence of your purity and affection, and striving to make his presence known to you.” Edmonds further offered his condolences and the possibility that he might contact the departed on her behalf. “I feel that this letter will not afford you all the consolation you deserve,” he wrote, “and if at any time you desire more, do not hesitate to write me. If I knew who your dear one was, perhaps I might be able to converse with him for you.”16

Judging from literature and artifacts of the period, as well as exchanges in the Spiritualist press, the burden of mourning seemed to fall primarily on white, middle-class women, reflecting their position as keepers of domesticity and pillars of home and society.17 Though their letters to Spiritualist newspapers mourned spouses as well as children, little girls seemed to hold a particularly treasured place in women’s hearts. A typical letter ran: “She was but a little child, my little ——, scarce five years old; but as an only daughter, had become doubly dear to me.”18 Both women and little girls figure prominently in this discourse. Men were largely absent from these exchanges as mourners, though they did function as purveyors of advice and solace.

In many ways the epistolary “consolation literature” printed in the Spiritualist press, and Spiritualism itself, fit squarely within a larger mid-nineteenth-century, middle-class sentimental culture, one that had a particular fascination with death.19 In attempting to understand the Victorian cult of the dead, a scholar’s first impulse is to assume that the mortality rate rose during the period. Indeed, historians have shed new light on Americans’ relationship to death in the antebellum period by charting demographic trends in life expectancy. As Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein detail,
the Revolutionary War generation saw a “gradual increase in life expectancy between 1750 and 1790, in spite of the Revolutionary War; yet, while survival statistics vary among geographic regions, we have also learned that the average American’s life span declined after 1790, from approximately fifty-six to forty-eight years by the time of the Civil War.”

Scourges of typhoid, yellow fever, and tuberculosis undid the expectation—at least among the more prosperous classes—that medical science could reduce mortality. An additional seven hundred thousand Americans died during the Civil War. The epidemics of the “cholera years,” which spread with a new rapidity in increasingly populated cities and among the urban poor, combined with the devastation of the war years, cast the shadow of death over the promised progress of the nineteenth century.

Evidence of the Victorians’ obsessive interest in death is widely available in the literature and theology of the period, as it is in memento mori. A remarkably high proportion of the lyric poetry of the era, especially by women writers, addresses the themes of death and dying, bereavement and mourning. The historian Ann Douglas has termed the memoirs of women and clergymen written in the 1850s as veritable “exercises in necrophilia.” Indeed, the deathbed scene was a ubiquitous literary convention in the mid-nineteenth century, not only in fiction but also in sermons, memoirs, and biographies. In this genre, a moving death was more important than a significant life: the deathbed was the focus and telos of every life, however short.

Intricate rituals of sentimental culture effectively adjusted the social focus from the dead to the living. Antebellum mourning manuals functioned like etiquette books, prescribing elaborate funerals and bereavement rituals. Dress marked different stages of mourning, each with its own corresponding rituals and obligations. The first stage of mourning demanded black: “A dead solid color’ of black that gave no hint of blue or rust.” This stage mandated lockets, brooches, earrings of black jet, and a veil, which could be lifted in the second stage of mourning. The so-called rural cemetery movement of the mid-nineteenth century, which saw rolling cemeteries on the edge of townships replace family and church graveyards in town centers, was another sign of change in community practices as well as in the physical place of the dead. Like the new mourning culture, resituating the dead from a central place in daily life to its spatial periphery marked a shift from communal grief to broader societal mourning.

Historians have described Victorian mourning customs in both the United States and Britain as “extravagant displays” that imposed a heavy burden on bereaved families. As the historian Karen Halttunen has argued, in a soci-
ety increasingly stratified by class, pomp-filled funerals and imposing grave-
stones became a means of asserting status and respectability, of differenti-
ing oneself from the lower orders. These rituals became visible signs of a
mourner’s “Christian piety, social benevolence, and sincere sensibility.”28 A
baroque protocol was used at once to mark proper Christian bereavement
and to unmask the insincere mourner or pretender to middle-class status.

Spiritualist and sentimental mourning practices, however, constitute dis-
tinct practices born of a shared wellspring of culture. Comparing the heart-
wrenching words published in Spiritualist newspapers, bespeaking a deeply
personal anguish, with the sentimental rituals steeped in convention and
designed to perform sincerity, one runs up against a fissure in middle-class
cultures of mourning. Spiritualist bereavement stands in stark contrast to
these prescribed displays and seems to express quite different needs. The
critic Jeffrey Steele has suggested that it may be more useful to think not of
“one culture of mourning, but multiple cultures that overlapped and inter-
sected in a variety of ways.”29 Spiritualist mourning practices, then, may be
understood as one culture of mourning that coexisted alongside a similar
sentimental culture.

Although letters to publications like the Shekinah and the Banner of Light
were intended for circulation, and were thus more public and performative
than purely private acts of mourning, they did not function as spectacle.
Correspondents almost always wrote anonymously or at least were published
under pseudonyms. Editors replaced names and references to correspondents’
family members with double dashes, circumventing both social and familial
recognition. Neither were these exchanges overtly pedagogical. In contrast to
Victorian advice manuals like Nehemiah Adams’s Agnes and the Little Key:
Or, Bereaved Parents Instructed and Comforted, or the Reverend Theodore
Cuyler’s The Empty Crib, Spiritualist epistolary consolation literature did
not dictate behavior or suggest that mourners strike a particular emotional
note.30

Letters of grief written to the Spiritualist press, however did hew to the
sentimental convention that “only those who had been mourners could symp-
thpathize with the bereaved.”31 Letter writers expressed their sorrow as some-
thing that was intelligible only to those who had experienced it; they there-
fore sought solace from like souls. To Judge Edmonds, another woman wrote:
“To others my grief may appear excessive, but you, who have lost children,
may conceive of the anguish of a mother’s spirit, in seeing suddenly snatched
from her arms, in the space of a few hours, the idol of her heart . . . and who
in that Spirit-world can replace the mother in this?”32 Writers almost always
communicated that no one in the world understood their pain. What most characterizes this literature is a sense of social isolation among the correspondents, of being without collective comfort and alone with solitary grief. It is hard to say whether these bereaved individuals found themselves actually excluded from the materialistic cult of mourning and untouched by the era’s mostly literary ethos of sentimentality or whether they were voicing grief as a longing for connection that these social forms repressed. In some ways, the very existence of these epistolary exchanges speaks to the shared sense among letter writers that their immediate social circles had failed them and that another imagined community, in this case a community in print, was required to assist in the mourning process.

Writers to the Spiritualist press did not always identify themselves as Spiritualists, though it is likely that many arrived at this belief system through their mourning processes and through the collective solace provided by Spiritualist communities in print and in person. Grieving “seekers” received assurances that they were not alone or, as Judge Edmonds put it, not “solitary instances.” While it did not guarantee seekers contact with dead loved ones, Spiritualism provided a community of the living for the living. This transformation of the grieving individual into a member of a collectivity was particularly important at a moment when individualism was taking on a new ideological power—especially for the middle classes and particularly for middle-class white women.

The shift from communalism to individualism was a slow and uneven process, one that was intimately related to the growth of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth-century United States. For the working classes and most immigrant groups, community concerns remained paramount well into the twentieth century. While ethnic and class affiliation continued to shape communities, changing ideas about time and work in a new age of capitalism stressed the role of the individual in shaping his or her own life. On a theological plane, the focus of most Americans shifted from preparing for death to enjoying life. Calvinist predestination became increasingly unacceptable to American Protestants whose daily lives underscored the necessity of creating their own earthly and eternal futures. The spirit of capitalism was the spirit of the age and, for many nineteenth-century bourgeois Americans, individualism was a pragmatic component of life and of death.

The nineteenth century marked the beginning of death as an individual or familial concern, rather than one involving an entire community. Although the theological conception of individuality in death emerged over centuries, as Philippe Ariès has argued, it was not until the twentieth century that most
members of society were allotted a personal burial space. On the one hand, affluent classes engaged in these increasingly private observances as a demonstration of individuality and economic autonomy. On the other hand, many families experienced this circumscription of death to the nuclear family as a loss of community and a mounting sense of social isolation. This process was hastened by urbanization, as many Americans were distanced from the communities into which they had been traditionally integrated. In these circumstances, death took on new meaning and power; the evisceration of community consolation made it intolerable. In this context, Spiritualism emerged as an alternative to both an increasingly individuated society and the commodified rituals of sentimental culture.

Some Spiritualists publicly criticized “the showy and utterly hollow rituals” connected with sentimental rites of burial. Many chafed at the empty materialism of a culture that equated the quantity and quality of mourning’s accoutrements with the depth of felt loss. “These [rituals] make themselves manifest in the imposing styles of funerals, and the pageantry with which these decent ceremonies that naturally pertain to death are overlaid. . . . The style of dress, the cut of the cap, the width of the ribbon, the breadth of the crepe, indicates the depth of grief and the nearness of the relative dead,” explained a Spiritualist editorialist, opining that “all this parade and pomp will avail nothing.” Others saw the performative nature of grief in these rituals merely as a reification of the griever: “Much of mourning is rooted in selfishness. The more external, the more conspicuous the weeping.” One critic went so far as to directly challenge the sincerity and faith of the mourners, writing: “Weeping, mourning, and darkened drapery are not signs of intense sorrow, but rather of doubt.” Yet Spiritualists were not looking to purify sentimental rites of mourning with a more vigorous faith but rather to address doubt through an interrogation of death itself.

Spiritualism gave believers a community of fellow mourners who could take them beyond personal grief and the increasingly domesticated, sentimental rituals of middle-class mourning, offering instead new possibilities for life. In a formulation that, at once, recapitulated a focus on the living and denied the existence of death, one believer explained: “We shall only think of what lives and have no fruitless lamentations for what dies.” Indeed, a faith in Spiritualism, and in contact between the dead and the living, allowed some nineteenth-century Americans a new way of being in the world. However, Spiritualism did function in this way for many nineteenth-century Americans. Once-private grief could be assuaged not only by public solace but also by the assurance that the dead did not die. In this sense, the signifi-
Figure 2. “Unidentified man with a long beard seated with three ‘spirits,’” ca. 1861. William H. Mumler (photographer, American, 1832–84, active Boston, Massachusetts). Catalog no. 84.XD.760.1.2.4. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
cance of Spiritualism may be in its attention to the specificity of the dead, the conjured voice, hand, or message. In an Anglo-American society obsessed with mourning only as a performative practice that tamed the power of loss and displaced the physical bodies of the dead to the spatial outskirts of culture, to attempt to draw the dead nearer was to move against that current.

WOMEN, CHILDREN, AND OTHER LIMINAL SUBJECTS

The anthropologist Victor Turner’s concept of liminality as a space or transitional period between two established social roles is useful for understanding both cultural practices of mourning and the making of a Spiritualist medium. Mourners and the dead might be understood as passing through analogous liminal spaces: mourners journey from grief through mourning and back to the world of the living; the dead travel from the land of the living to the other side. Mediums were thus doubly liminal figures, traversing two worlds, literally mediating a space between the living and the dead while obviating the necessity of mourning. Moreover, Spiritualism implicitly intervened in the liminal spaces of secular time, at once adhering to and challenging the Victorian invention of the child. A number of historians have charted the way the movement drew women from the margins of society to the center of this religious practice. However, combining a study of women as a marginalized identity with the liminality of the newly figured child offers a more complicated view of Spiritualism’s unique negotiations with the era’s notions of religion and gender.

Although women and—somewhat less often—effeminate, “gentle” men were called to spiritual service, it was young girls who held a privileged and foundational place in Spiritualist practice. The first mediums, the Fox sisters, like many who followed in their footsteps, were in the borderland between childhood and adulthood when they began their spiritual communications. The middle third of the nineteenth century, the founding years of Spiritualism, also marked a crucial point in the making of childhood, a concept deployed for both class regulation and the production of sentimental innocence. School reformers shaped a major revolution in classroom discipline, primarily in schools for the poor and working classes. Many middle-class parents who sent their children to school incorporated these disciplinary lessons into home life. The 1840s and 1850s saw the rise of child-rearing guides and advice books, instructing middle-class parents how to shear children from their playful, impulsive ways and direct them toward sober, industrious futures. At a moment when their childhood dreamscapes of ghosts
and night visitors should have been fading into the decidedly unfanciful realities of work and marriage, Spiritualism offered a different vision. As mediums, girls in particular occupied a privileged place as intermediaries between this world and the next at the very moment when their possibilities for power, speech, and imagination were fast diminishing.

Mediums were often from rural areas and of the working or lower middle classes. Yet they also embodied less material, more numinous qualities. Biographies and autobiographies of nineteenth-century Spiritualists sketch remarkably similar patterns in the making of a medium. The early life history of Emma Hardinge, who wrote her own autobiography as well as histories of other movement leaders, was typical: she described herself as serious, solitary, imaginative, and a daydreamer. In this regard, her childhood is similar to those of other nineteenth-century Spiritualist autobiographers; and her account of her youth takes a decidedly morbid turn. She recalls never being “young, joyous or happy, like other children; my delight was to steal away alone and to seek the solitude of woods and fields, but above all to wander in churchyards, cathedral cloisters, and old monastic ruins.” She adds that she also liked “to be laid on a bed of sickness” to “pass away in dreams . . . and go off to the unknown and fascinating fairyland.”

When she penned her 1869 history of modern American Spiritualism, Hardinge fittingly began with the children who inaugurated the movement. She wrote that “a score of years ago the name ‘Spiritualist’ was unknown on the American continent, whilst all the sum of Spiritualism was contained in the persons of three young girls, ignominiously designated the ‘Rochester knockers.’” These “three young girls” took their place in history when the two youngest, Kate and Margaret Fox, were eleven and fourteen years old; the third sister, Leah, was in fact quite a bit older and a married woman, though she is often included in this youthful triad. The “miracle” of spirit communication was understood by nineteenth-century contemporaries as all the more miraculous because of the guileless innocence attributed to girlhood—especially to the rural white girlhood of the Foxes. As one nineteenth-century Spiritualist historian asked, “What more fitting instrument could be found by the heavenly messengers to confound the wise and to reveal the things of the spirit than innocent children, little girls whose souls reflected the truths as the perfect mirror does its surrounding objects?”

The story of the first rappings places children and ghosts at its center, alongside a playfulness hardly befitting the founding story of a new religion. But Spiritualism as a popular religion in fact played with and in the contemporary genres of entertainment and belief. Thus believers as well as debunk-
ers tended to retell the creation story of Spiritualism as a sort of ghost story. Hardinge wrote the story of the Fox sisters with the cadences of a tale told at a campfire or a child’s bedside: “Imagine the place to be an humble cottage bedroom in a remote obscure hamlet; the judges and jurors, simple unsophisticated rustics; and the witness an invisible, unknown being, a denizen of a world of whose very existence mankind has been ignorant . . . and breaking through what has been deemed the dark and eternal seal of death, which not even the fabled silence of the tomb could longer hide away.”

Once the scary scene is set, the story emerges that, late one night, Mrs. Fox heard strange noises emanating from the floors and ceiling of her rural farmhouse. Blaming Kate and Margaret for the disturbances, Mrs. Fox insisted they stop. As the raps and knocks continued, the girls maintained that not only were they not making the noises, but that the communications were made by a spirit who rapped in response to their questions. Kate, the youngest of the Fox sisters, imitated the ghostly sounds by snapping her fingers. Naming her ghost “Mr. Splitfoot,” she said, “Mr. Splitfoot, do as I do,” clapping her hands, to which the specter responded with the same number of raps.

The power and pull of the Fox sisters’ story not only derived from a gothic literary tradition; it also evoked local folk traditions of extrareligious spiritual happenings. For this was not the first time unexplained events had been reported in Hydesville. Earlier residents had also heard strange scrapings and noises in the old farmhouse, and neighbors came forward to tell stories of hauntings there. The Fox family decided that the mysterious communications came from a peddler who had been murdered in the house. Observers were called in to witness the disturbances, reporting noises from the attic and cellar and sights of moving furniture and slamming doors. In her book *The Missing Link*, Leah Fox [Fish] Underhill told of these nightly knocks and strange disturbances. “Articles of furniture were moved, doors opened and shut, the sound of persons walking about was distinctly heard, the beds upon which they were sleeping would be raised from the floor and dropped down again, until they were obliged to take the bedding and lay it on the floor.”

Mrs. Fox swore in signed testimony that she was not “a believer in haunted houses or supernatural appearances” and apologized for the “excitement” over the rappings. “It has been a great deal of trouble for us,” she continued. “It was our misfortune to live there at the time; but I am willing and anxious that the truth be known. I cannot account for these noises; all that I know is that they have been heard repeatedly.” In some ways, Mrs. Fox would become the model for the doubtful “investigator.”

Hearing news of these spiritual visitations, locals came by to ask questions
of the spirit. Quizzing this supernatural being about the most mundane aspects of their lives, Hydesville residents were thrilled to get correct responses, in the form of knocks, to their queries about the ages of their children and the births and deaths of relatives. A local lawyer dutifully recorded all statements. When Kate Fox was taken to Rochester to visit her sister Leah, she found that the raps traveled with her. Spirits soon began to clamor in Rochester in private gatherings held for prominent guests. From their debut, the spirits seemed to have a wonderful knack for publicity. The first meeting, in what would come to be called a spirit circle or séance, was held at the residence of Isaac and Amy Post, prominent Quaker abolitionists whose home had been a stop on the Underground Railroad. Among the invited guests at this first séance were celebrated activists, writers, and editors. Frederick Douglass, then the editor of the *North Star*, was a frequent visitor to the Post residence.

When strange noises began to circulate around the bodies of the Fox sisters, it was not assumed that the girls were deceiving either themselves or the public. Their credibility derived in part from the many witnesses to the supernatural events in Hydesville and Rochester, respected community members whose testimony was thought to be reliable. Within the belief system of Spiritualism as well as in a broader Victorian context, seeing was believing. Neighbors of the Fox family and Rochester séance-goers had all posed questions to the spirits, who had revealed knowledge of human events that was considered by the listeners as inaccessible by natural means. Questioners eventually concluded that the raps were coming from many spirits, including the spirits of their own dead relatives, rather than solely from the murdered peddler who had set off the first storm of effects in Hydesville. The raps occurred, for the most part, only when the Fox girls were present, but investigators did not grill the young mediums as to how they might have produced the noises: they did not verbally question the sisters. As one historian astutely puts it, “Americans wanted to talk to spirits, and they would have found a way to do it with or without Kate and Margaret Fox.” The mediums’ youthful innocence, and most significantly their middle-class femaleness, lent them an unbroachable sincerity reinforced by believers’ own desire for communication with the dead.

The Fox sisters’ communications with the afterlife were eventually debunked, but the desire they had inspired in average Americans took on a life of its own. Americans who wanted to speak to spirits had to do so through mediums, but not everyone could become a medium. Mediumship was something visited on a person, and, according to memoirs and accounts...
in the Spiritualist press, it came unannounced. These visitations produced a spectrum of emotions, ranging from excitement to terror. As chapter 4 details, young girls who found themselves conduits for strange voices or subject to hypnotic trance states would have been as likely to be placed under the care of a doctor or clergyman as embraced by a spirit circle. Many incipient mediums had spent much of their early lives in sickbeds prior to discovering Spiritualism.

The Banner of Light editor, Luther Colby, referred to mediums as “tender susceptible plants.” Indeed, little girls were seen as ripe for mediumship in part because of the cultural assumption that they were passive, guileless, and incapable of producing feats of skilled speech or writing through normal means. The language used to refer to the onset of mediumship was as passive as its subjects: one was “developed” as a medium. This process was linear and progressive, a spiritual journey that brought unschooled girls and women, theoretically without their own volition, to epiphanies of spiritual understanding.

Soon after the Fox sisters’ 1848 revelations, young girls throughout upstate New York discovered hidden spiritual talents. For the most part, Spiritualist writers and the newspapers that published them described the onset of mediumship as a momentous event, celebrated by the community. In the family of a “Mr. Anson Attwood,” of Troy, New York, “a gentlemen of prominent position and high character,” one of his little daughters, a child of about ten years of age, became suddenly developed for “marvellous phases of the strongest physical character.” The tiny medium extracted payment in the form of a “liberal supply of candy,” and while she “munched away at her sweetmeats the spirits lifted her about and moved her from place to place.” She conjured spirit raps and translated them; she performed feats of automatic writing and clairvoyance. And, as Emma Hardinge gushed, similar manifestations “continued to spring up like grass beneath the feet in every place and with a variety of developments.”

Among the many mediums of the 1850s, none was more renowned than Cora L. V. Scott. She was a trance medium and spiritual speaker whom the press took great pleasure in describing as “a delicate-featured blond” with “flaxen ringlets falling over her shoulders.” She was depicted as both sexualized and innocent, with accounts typically waxing eloquent over Scott’s “ethereal beauty” and femininity while also expressing admiration for “her movements, deliberate and self-possessed, voice calm and deep, and eyes and fingers in no way nervous.” In a photograph that circulated widely in the 1850s, Scott is pictured with flowing, pre-Raphaelite hair and a look of angelic innocence.
befitting one who made her New York debut as “a young lady of scarce seventeen summers.” Unpacking and analyzing this combination of female virtues and masculine endowments not only sheds light on the making of mediums in the nineteenth century but also opens up broader questions about the meanings of female sexuality and subjectivity during the era.

Cora Scott’s “development” as a medium began in 1851, when she was eleven years old, living with her family in Lake Mills, Wisconsin. Born in Allegheny County, New York, in the same region of the state that nurtured the Fox Sisters and many other prominent Spiritualists, Cora found her spiritual gifts soon after leaving the region. It was then, as her biographers tell it, that Cora went one day to an arbor of trees in her family garden to write a composition for school. She awoke, as she supposed, from a sleep, and found her slate “covered with writing not her own.” Assuming that someone else had written on the slate while she was sleeping, Cora brought it inside for her mother to read. Her mother found the communications to be addressed to herself, from a sister who had “been in the spirit world some years.” Cora had never been told of her mother’s dead sister. The only other person in the garden while Cora slept was her four-year-old sister, who could neither read nor write.

This “singular manifestation” was considered the first evidence of Cora Scott’s mediumship. Immediately after, she was developed as an “unconscious trance-medium.” Cora communicated to her family that she had been “directed by spirit guidance, through her own organism” to leave school. At age eleven, having ended her formal education, she prescribed cures for various diseases while entranced and under the control of “a celebrated German physician.” People came from miles around to be healed by the child medium. Mediumship offered the possibility of work for young women, which would have paid more than other forms of labor and certainly more than a typical eleven-year-old could earn. Nevertheless, the question of whether mediums should charge for their spiritual services and, if so, how much was hotly debated in the Spiritualist press. Most did earn money for their work, often after male breadwinners had somehow failed the family.

Emma Hardinge, who began her career with a British theatrical troupe and ended it as one of the most prominent mediums of the nineteenth century, embarked on her public life soon after her father died. As she wrote in her autobiography (in the third person), “Being deprived of her good father’s care at a very tender age, the young girl, like the rest of her family, was compelled to depend on her own talents for subsistence.” Another famous Spiritualist, Victoria Woodhull, found her calling in her father Buck’s traveling medicine show, where she and her sister, Tennessee Claflin, sometimes
known as the “Wonderful Child,” performed feats of psychic healing and clairvoyance for paying customers. The Hardinge, Woodhull, and Scott families may have been crassly delighted with the financial rewards of their daughters’ spiritual callings. However, it is equally likely that they found religious justifications for allowing these young girls to perform public work. “There are certain good works to accomplish which it is permitted the young girl to leave the domestic sanctuary, and if necessary, even to throw aside that reserve which characterize her age,” wrote a prominent Spiritualist. Advising a girl with gifts that she may do more than “assist her mother in household duties” or “lend her arm to support her aged father,” he concluded: “Go, my daughter, go without hesitation, and may God be with you.”

The Scott family, in particular, came out of exactly the antinomian Protestant reform tradition that gave rise to Spiritualism. Cora’s father, David W. Scott, described variously as an “independent” or “free thinker,” had some interest in Spiritualism and more than a little in utopian reform. Scott had begun correspondence with Adin Ballou after reading about his utopian
Mourning, media, and conjuring the dead

Scott visited Ballou at Hopedale and was inspired by this cooperative colony dedicated to “Practical Christian Socialism.” Scott moved his family to Wisconsin in 1851 to gain access to land on which to begin his own colony, modeled after Hopedale. However, Scott’s plans were disrupted, and later completely abandoned, when his daughter Cora was developed as a medium. In a match made in heaven, one of Cora’s first spirit guides was Ballou’s son Adin Augustus Ballou, the dead scion of Hopedale.

Cora’s mother, Lodensy Butterfield, later found her own spiritual talents, and it was soon discovered that there were several mediums in the family besides Cora. Her grandmother, her aunts Olive, Catherine, and Cordelia, and her Uncle Edwin were all developed as mediums, and much of the rest of the extended family converted to Spiritualism. Cora Scott, at age eleven, had effectively altered the direction of her entire family’s lives. David Scott gave up his dream of a Western Hopedale to guide Cora’s career, and they soon took her talents on the road. At age fourteen Cora landed in Buffalo, New York, where she spent two years as a regular speaker at a western New York Spiritualist society. There she developed “joint mediumship” with a Miss Sarah Brooks, with whom she “frequently held trance séances, at which one would be controlled to speak in foreign tongues, whilst the other interpreted the mystic utterances.”

Although Spiritualism offered a world in which young women could craft unique forms of autonomy, many depended on their spirits, who were often male and socially powerful. The spirit of the “celebrated German physician,” who came to Cora at fourteen and brought her knowledge of pharmaceuticals and medical treatment, inaugurated Cora’s relationships with eminent and not so eminent men. In 1853, her father died, and sometime between her fourteenth and seventeenth year Cora married the much older Benjamin F. Hatch, a dentist. The marriage did not last long. In Spiritual Iniquities Unmasked, and, the Hatch Divorce Case, Dr. Hatch excoriated Cora for leaving him for another man. He also rebuked Spiritualists in general for encouraging “free love.” His account of the marriage, written in the aftermath of a bitter separation, is nothing if not self-serving; but it nevertheless traces the outlines of a story that his ex-wife and other Spiritualists corroborated elsewhere. According to his account, Hatch discovered Cora and rescued her from the peripatetic life of an impoverished Spiritualist traveler. He described supporting both Cora and her mother and training the young medium in how to best use her unformed gifts. Hatch depicted himself as working with “untiring toil” to advance Cora’s career.
Cora’s account, written many years later, not surprisingly presents a somewhat different story. She accused Hatch of taking advantage of her innocence, lying about his own social status in order to marry her under false pretenses. (Hatch stopped practicing as a dentist soon after marrying the young ingenue.) She accused him of keeping all of the profits from her work for himself and forcing her and her mother to beg for money.\textsuperscript{72} Hatch admitted that he kept firm control over the profits, but by his own account he was extremely generous with his wife and her family: “My rule was to anticipate her wants as far as possible, and thus supply them before requested to do so.”\textsuperscript{73} While he was working to develop her career, Hatch claimed, Cora lazed about, doing nothing to prepare for her appearances. Still a teenager, Cora had arrived in New York a little over a year earlier, attended by great success on stage and in society parlors; her divorce was closely tracked by the press, especially the respected \textit{New York Daily Tribune}.\textsuperscript{74}

In New York City, Cora attended regular Sunday meetings with other prominent Spiritualists, where they discussed events of the day and performed spiritual anthems, hymns, and oratory for an audience. From 1853 through the 1870s, the New York Spiritualists met at the Stuyvesant Institute, the Hope Chapel and, later at Dodworth’s Hall, where they attracted the attention of the popular press as well as building a loyal following in the Spiritualist press.

The connections between the popular and Spiritualist presses were more tangled than one might imagine. The \textit{Tribune} editor, Horace Greeley, was an early Spiritualist investigator. Having lost four small children during the 1840s, Greeley asked Margaret Fox to perform a séance so that he and his wife could commune with the spirit of their son, “Pickie.” Greeley’s newspaper covered the travels of the Fox sisters and other spiritual events through the 1840s and early 1850s, and in 1859, Greeley allotted a column to the Spiritualist and retired judge John Worth Edmonds.\textsuperscript{75}

Cora Scott, like the Fox Sisters before her, became a celebrity, often lecturing to packed crowds that flowed out into the streets. A contemporary account reported: “She has carried the New Yorkers by storm, and every one of her lectures in that city have been attended by wondering thousands.”\textsuperscript{76} Entering the hall and climbing the lectern in a noticeable trance state, she expounded on subjects as diverse as medicine and science and the history of Christianity.\textsuperscript{77} A committee of Spiritualists gathered from the audience would propose a topic of scientific, religious or philosophic significance thought to be beyond the ken of an ordinary woman. At other times, the controlling spirit, voiced through the medium, would choose the topic.\textsuperscript{78}
Cora Scott bears more than a passing resemblance to Henry James’s Verena Tarrant, the trance-speaking heroine of *The Bostonians*, who is manipulated by a series of political, amorous, and spiritual figures. Like the fictional Verena, who was first mesmerized by her huckster father, Selah Tarrant, Cora Scott performed under “controls.” Nineteenth-century Spiritualists understood trance mediums as being under the power of a spirit stronger than their own. Controls typically worked from the spirit realm: that is, Spiritualists recognized mediums as being ventriloquized by spirits of the dead. In a process suggestive of mesmerism, however, the controlling operator might also be a mere mortal, who entranced the medium and guided her to channel a spirit. In either case, controls were typically men.79

Yet to assume that Cora Scott was merely an instrument of either the spirits or the living men who orchestrated her career is to underestimate the subversive power of both the practice of mediumship and of this particular medium. Scott’s sermons were regularly reprinted in the *Banner of Light*, often with accompanying commentary. Praise for her words was as common as the belief that they could not have been her own. Nathaniel Parker Willis, the editor of the *Home Journal*, reported on Scott’s performances at Dodsworth’s Hall and remarked on how “very curious it was, to see a long-haired young woman standing alone in the pulpit, her face turned upward, her delicate bare arms raised in a clergyman’s attitude of devotion, and a church full of people listening attentively while she prayed.”80 Indeed, in histories of the nineteenth-century women’s movement, the image that is typically cited to illustrate the movement’s transformative power is the appearance of the woman speaker before a “mixed audience.”

Willis had clearly never seen a young woman holding an audience rapt. But “how to explain it, with her age, habits, education,” he concluded, “is the true point at issue.”81 As a nonbeliever, Willis was unwilling to attribute Cora Scott’s feats to spiritual agency, but neither was he willing to attribute them to her own ability. Asking “how to explain it,” Willis never even entertained the possibility that the alacrity of speech could have been the medium’s own. He also failed to notice the genius of an even more extraordinary woman in his milieu: Harriet Jacobs toiled in Willis’s Brooklyn home while writing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.82

*The Bostonians* evokes and yet never really entertains the spiritual dimension of female mediumship, providing instead a critique of female impressionability and a damning exposé of the political as too personal in nineteenth-century U.S. reformist circles. By contrast, Scott’s history offers a more generous and collaborative account of a medium’s development.
Although Cora Scott’s formal schooling had ended at age eleven, the con-
stant company of adult Spiritualists thereafter may very well have provided a
richer education. A teacher quoted in her official biography remembered
Cora as a remarkable student with a photographic memory: “She did not
seem to have to study her lessons at all.” And, regardless of whether she
actually channeled spirits, Scott was unusually adept at channeling the reli-
gious spirit of the age. The texts of her lectures reveal her thorough knowl-
edge of the generic Protestant antinomianism that was in the air among
Spiritualists and many others in the 1850s.

In a speech titled “Christianity in America,” Scott spoke of John Calvin
and Martin Luther, “the great institutors of the present forms of Protestant
religion” who “are as familiar to you as your own name.” Like many religious
figures of the day, she was pushing the logic of Protestantism beyond its insti-
tutional manifestations. Speaking in the first person plural to represent her-
self and the spirits, she asserted that “we still have to tell you that the form of
Protestant religion is susceptible of almost any interpretation; and that the
standard of present Christianity is not the Bible, but humanity; that the
Bible was just what it is now in the days of the Romish church in their greed
and prosperity; that the new Testament was just as it is now when the Pope
reigned over all Christendom, and the thunders of the Vatican gave forth
their tones, and the terrors of the Inquisition gave way.” Scott, as well as the
audience she addressed, would have been well versed in critiques of institu-
tionalized Calvinism and aware of a broader anticlericalism and exaltation
of individual conscience. Scott at once evokes standard antipapal sentiment
to reject biblical fundamentalism in favor of a religious humanism.

From a twenty-first-century vantage it is hard to imagine that these far-
ranging speeches were thought beyond the capability of a woman speaker.
However, without fail, the argument adduced to support the authenticity of
her gifts was the fact that she could not have produced these speeches with-
out spirit direction or delivered them unless in a trance. “She is evidently
under the control of a higher order of spirits,” wrote one admirer. “Her use
of language is almost perfect, while it is obvious to everyone that she has not
above ordinary intellect, and her years preclude the possibility of her being
conversant with all the topics that come before her.”

Scott held private circles for interested, paying New Yorkers who sought
spiritual guidance. In these “investigating” circles, “the most distinguished
savans of the country” discussed the philosophy of Spiritualism with Scott.
The circles typically concluded, as did her lectures, with an opportunity for
an interested inquirer to ask questions “propounded on the spot.” That she
could answer these questions was, again, proof that she was under spirit control. When speaking, she did so in a trance, the most passive of states, performing masculine prowess in a stereotypically feminine embodiment. On the one hand, she spoke, but her speech was understood as ventriloquized; she received no credit for her own intellectual, verbal, or performative skills. On the other hand, she carved out a space and commanded a public unique for a woman of her day.

Scott conducted her private life with some of the same combination of classically feminine passivity and scandalous, unwomanly acts that characterized her public life. When she freed herself from her first husband, B. F. Hatch, she found reason and defense in Spiritualism for doing so. While the New York Tribune, Herald, and Post all ran stories on Mrs. Hatch, “free love,” and the rumored “forty mediums” who have “separated or are wanting to separate from their wedded partners,” Spiritualist newspapers defended their belief system as one in which people live as “happily with their companions” as any others do, “many of them much more happily than before they became Spiritualists.” Benjamin Hatch fueled this media fire, penning bizarre articles with accusations that “all who have sought for divorce, have, to a greater or less extent, possessed mediumistic powers.” One editor of a Spiritualist paper countered with the notion that if a woman “fell from virtue” in marriage, then it was most typically evidence of “her husband’s blameworthiness,” as men “pretend to the right of roaming.”

Other writers pointed to the implied support of Spiritualism for “free love.” One editorial writer admitted that inasmuch as Spiritualism “breaks down the barriers of wealth and caste, and places its disciples—or aims to do so—on a platform of common brotherhood,” it also opens the door to a sometimes dangerous “freedom of action.” It was precisely this freedom of action that allowed Cora Scott Hatch to find sanction to leave Benjamin Hatch. Her Spiritualist achievements gave her a level of control over her life and career that was rare among her peers. Indeed, Scott’s career lasted another half century after her divorce. Although she continued to attach herself to sometimes difficult men—marrying four times—Cora L. V. Scott Hatch Daniels Tappan Richmond wrote hundreds of books and articles and remained a favorite trance speaker at Spiritualist camp meetings and lectures well into the twentieth century.

Many depictions of mediums adopted the genre of the conversion narrative to contain the tangle of contradictions that characterized Cora Scott’s life. The story that circulated about the making of the medium Anna M. Henderson was told as the classic tale of submissive service to the spirits.
Henderson’s story ran as part of the “history of mediums” series in the *Banner of Light*. Like all the others, it employed a narrative formula in which women were drawn to the calling by what Calvin called “irresistible grace.” Young girls or women were called to service and then “developed” by the spirits. Anna Henderson’s narrative began:

At the age of twenty-one, seven years since, she attended the first circle for spiritual manifestations, when she received the following communication, by raps: “You are a medium. Be submissive to the will of God; a great work is before you to do.” She felt a thrill of happiness, such as she never felt before; felt a deep and earnest interest in the subject that she could not describe, or resist. She felt drawn by an unseen power to devote her time, her thoughts and her soul, to this new and seemingly strange influence. Thus, for a few months, she continued constantly to think, talk, and attend meetings on the subject, until she became developed as a trance medium.92

Anna Henderson was unusual in that she wrote to the *Banner* to correct her story. Among other details, the article claimed that Henderson did not believe in taking money for her services. She wrote to say that this was not the case. In righting this one error, Henderson provided a rare glimpse into a medium’s own sense of her calling as work. She wrote: “It is true, during the first years of my labors, when I was engaged in lecturing mostly in country villages, I made no demand—that is, I had no set price—and many times left my home with barely enough of the needful to bear me to my place of destination, leaving it altogether to the guardians and the good friends that I visited, to furnish means for my return home. My experience is that it costs a medium just as much to ride in a railroad car as it does any other person.”93

Some openly criticized the commodification of mediumship (while freely availing themselves of mediums’ services), but Henderson found this view a particularly galling act of hypocrisy. She explained that people expected her to do her work without pay, sometimes offering only food or lodging. As she tells it, these “customers” would announce that “we do not believe in paying mediums; this is a free gospel and we must not turn it into merchandise.” She observed that this goodwill would not feed or clothe her and that “ mediums, as well as others, are generally too tangible and material to live on faith. . . . [E]very reasonable person will justify me in demanding an equivalent.” She signed this letter: “With a heart warm and willing to aid in this great work, in my humble way, for the good of humanity. I am very cordially yours, Anna M. Henderson.”94

Mediums were indeed intervening at the nexus of a new theology and
Henderson made a case for paid labor while still casting her words in the language of humility and service. Similarly, Cora Hatch used her mediumship to craft a public career and a radically free personal life, buttressed by a belief system that supported her actions. The complicated contradictions of Spiritualism allowed these women to be at once in this world and of another and to find a place for their own versions of work, sexuality, speech, and spirituality.

That women were central to Spiritualism is not surprising given the rise of female participation in religious movements, sentimental mourning cultures, and political reforms following the Second Great Awakening, the second major religious revival in U.S. history. The privileging of female mediums, however, radically challenged the binary notions of the private and public sphere, the personal and the political, the religious and the secular. This new religion’s renegotiation of gender was so radical and pervasive that it is inseparable from the movement’s other, multiple concerns. It is perhaps this expansiveness that threatened Spiritualists’ nineteenth-century contemporaries and has rendered Spiritualism only partly legible in our own time.

In an essay written in 1973, which defined a new field of historical inquiry, Barbara Welter pointed to “the feminization of American religion.” Welter argued that in the first half of the nineteenth century, American religion—specifically American Protestantism—saw an “increased prominence of women in religious organizations” and a “new catering to this membership.” This change in American religion, she contended, was more important for women than “anything which happened within women’s organizations or in related reform groups.” The desire to “perfect” human institutions was the product of a specific moment in the history of reform Protestantism. The Second Great Awakening swept away Calvinist predestination and presented believers with the possibility of acting to save one’s own soul and a deep-rooted faith and belief in the individual’s ability to do so. This combination gave rise to a peculiarly American form of industrial capitalism, as well a sense among a segment of white Protestants that reform of self and society was a duty and a right. A mixed group of reform movements, addressing education, temperance, prison conditions, the rights of women, the evils of slavery, and the dangers of immigrants and their Catholicism all fell within the reformer’s—and often the Spiritualist’s—purview. This reformist impulse took distinctive shape in different regions of antebellum America.
and was given different meaning by women and men of the working, middle, and upper classes. Emerson’s oft-quoted notion of reform as “the conviction that there is infinite worthiness in man, which will appear at the call of worth, and that all particular reforms are the removing of some impediment” characterized the general religious humanism of the era. Among many Spiritualists, however, the experience of a worldly incarnation of the afterlife informed more concrete and political versions of this ethos.

Spiritualist freethinkers were united in their belief in these reforms, including abolition, temperance, and women’s suffrage. In 1857, a Banner of Light editor answered his own rhetorical question, “What does Spiritualism call for?” with the answer: “Reform,” the “watchword of the day.” Yet many Spiritualists tended toward specific and unconventional theological formulations that both a generalized optimism and dominant reform movements would find hard to assimilate. As one reader wrote to the editor of the Spiritualist newspaper, the Banner of Light, “the Banner . . . is certainly doing a noble work, in directing men and women to the worship of the true and infinite God, who is perfect cause and perfect Providence; who is the Father and Mother of us all, and of all; who neither recognizes war, nor slavery, nor the degradation of women, nor any other wrong.” This reader was not unusual among nineteenth-century Americans who felt drawn by an impulse to perfect society. Yet his evocation of a Spiritualist notion of a dualistic, egalitarian Father and Mother God turns a broadly enthusiastic response to the ethos of reformism into a radical reconfiguration of theology.

In one sense, Spiritualism was a popular phenomenon that paralleled the rise of a print culture, which in turn gave voice to a noisy, eclectic reform culture. The Banner of Light newspaper, the longest-running and widest-ranging of the Spiritualist newspapers, circulated among religionists who were part of a broader, white reading public. Advertisements for Spiritualist newspapers targeted former Calvinists and aging Transcendentalists. These readers could fulfill their wants with weekly “verbatim phonographic reports” of the sermons of Henry Ward Beecher and Edwin H. Chapin; the “Philosopher and Metaphysician” could find the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson; the “Lover of Romance” discovered serialized stories and sentimental novellettes; and the “Reformer” could follow “the lectures of Cora L. V. Hatch, Emma Hardinge and other distinguished speakers who visit Boston and New York.”

From these readers and writers emerged an activist community in which women were central and gender was a key organizing principle. Reports from Spiritualist conventions reveal the leading lights of the Spiritualist move-
Figure 4. “The Spirit of Temperance,” tintype, ca. 1875. Wm. B. Becker Collection/American Museum of Photography © 1989 Wm. B. Becker. Spiritualists were active in myriad reform movements, including temperance. Here the medium of spirit photography conjures the double entendre of alcoholic spirits and double vision.
ment uniting behind the abolition of slavery, the “Right of woman to decide how often and under what circumstances she shall assume the responsibilities of Mother,” and a range of other “progressive” reforms. Undergirding these social resolutions was a religious individualism in which “the authority of each individual soul is absolute and final, in deciding questions as to what is true and false in principle, and right or wrong in practice” and a belief that “the individual, the Church, or the State, that attempts to control the opinions and practices of any man or woman, by an authority or power outside of his or her own soul, is guilty of a flagrant wrong.”

Spiritualism had a particular importance for those who sought alternatives to an outmoded Calvinism and an incipient secularism. Beginning in the 1830s, in the historian Sydney Ahlstrom’s characterization, a national “cry went up against hierarchies, seminary professors, dry learning, ‘hireling ministers,’ unconverted congregations and cold formalism.” Many Americans, whether or not they considered themselves Spiritualists, would have agreed with one Spiritualist editorial writer’s lament that “God has not been brought near enough; He has rather been kept away, and a class of men arrogating authority from Him have presumed to thrust themselves between.” As a religious practice, Spiritualism was a heterodox belief system that found adherents among disaffected white Protestants, especially Quakers, Unitarians, and Universalists, many of whom discovered in Spiritualism the immediacy and experiential solace absent from other liberal Christian theologies. Universalist clergymen like Uriah Clark abandoned their old associations for the new dispensation. In a few cases, entire Universalist congregations deserted the denomination to embrace Spiritualism. The Spiritualist lecturer Warren Chase made the assertion that, judging from his 1859 visit to the state, “most of the Universalists in Vermont had become Spiritualists.”

Many of these converts were women. Spiritualists appropriated the characteristics that had been used to deem women unfit for public life—piety, passivity, and purity—and transformed them into ideals of spirituality. In so doing, they made women not only appropriate purveyors of religious knowledge, but also influential public figures. Around séance tables and in public performances, mediums spoke in public at a time when very few other women did. Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 14: 34–35) that women keep silent in the churches was widely interpreted in the nineteenth century (and before and since) as Biblical justification for circumscribing women’s preaching. It was used to silence women on the podium as well as in the pulpit.

Historically, women have been excluded from positions of power in tradi-
tional Judeo-Christian religions; at the same time, they have been central as believers. Historians of Spiritualism and other forms of female mysticism have argued that the religious movements in which women have been prominent are those that embrace direct spiritual contact. Arthur Conan Doyle, in his two-volume history of Spiritualism, published in 1926, observed that “the early Spiritualists have been compared with the early Christians and there are indeed many points of resemblance.” He continued, “In one respect, however, the Spiritualists had an advantage. . . . The women of the older dispensation did their part nobly, living as saints and dying as martyrs, but they did not figure as preachers and missionaries. Psychic power and psychic knowledge are, however, as great in one sex as in another, and therefore many of the great pioneers of the spiritual revelation were women.” Personal and even corporeal spiritual experiences obviate the need for a learned clergy to mediate that experience, rendering religious practice open to women in ways that a more structured, hierarchical religion might not be.

In the nineteenth-century United States, women often found power in marginal religious movements that reinterpreted Biblical tradition or found other sources of prophecy or inspiration. A striking number of new religious movements were founded by women. Examples of such leaders include Ann Lee, the “mother” of the Shakers; Ellen G. White of the Seventh-Day Adventists; Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical movement; and Mary Baker Eddy, the originator of Christian Science. (The few religious movements that were founded by men following the Second Great Awakening established unconventional relations between the sexes as central to religious practice.) New Thought and Pentacostalist churches continue to have a higher proportion of women preachers and members than other Christian denominations.

Spiritualism appealed to nineteenth-century Americans who were already conversant with the language and belief systems of sects like the Shakers and Swedenborgians. These religions utilized a notion of an androgynous deity: the Shakers, for example, referred to the Holy Mother Wisdom and Father God. Universalists and Transcendentalists similarly embraced a concept of a universal spirit. The writings of the Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller constructed a gendered cosmos, which on closer inspection showed itself to be structured by a permeable and unstable divide. In Women in the Nineteenth Century, Fuller wrote that “Male and Female represent two sides of a great radical dualism. But in fact they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid, there is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.”
Spiritualist writers and speakers similarly called on, and disrupted, cosmological and social dualisms. Many discussed the importance of a balanced universe and the reintegration of matter and spirit, male and female. Some noted women’s particular suitability to this restoration and healing. However the “balance” that many Spiritualists sought was also one which unsettled the immutable binaries that midcentury science and culture rooted in the body.

In an 1859 speech in Boston’s Ordway Hall, the medium Amanda Spence spoke on “the Masculine, or Positive organization” and “the Feminine or Negative Organization.” Beginning with nature, she made a rhetorical move designed to valorize the feminine as necessary and coequal with the masculine. She argued that everything “from the lowest form of vegetable life, to man, and even to the Deity himself, is dual,” and “it is the equilibrium of these positive and negative forces, which creates balance, and harmony, and health. It is the preponderance of one of these in our physical being which causes physiological disease. . . . 

However, she added an important coda. While acknowledging that woman is typically the negative, and man the positive, she insisted that “each organization should be judged by its own laws, irrespective of its sex; that a man of feminine organization should . . . assume the duties to which his nature calls him, and that a woman of executive temperament ought, without accusations of manliness and coarseness, to be permitted to take her due part in the executive business of the world.”

Spiritualism, then, developed in a context where speakers could find receptive audiences for radical ideas about the relationship of gender to spirituality and the proper place of women in religion. In 1859, one Spiritualist medium spoke of women as “the half of which must complete the angel; the dual principle which makes our God, our father and mother.” More than three decades later, a prominent male medium voiced a similar sentiment when he wrote that “people cannot entertain an exclusively masculine idea of Deity and at the same time believe that motherhood is as divine as fatherhood.”

The most visible manifestation of the link between female empowerment and Spiritualism is the historic connection between suffragism and Spiritualism elucidated by Ann Braude. Both movements can be dated from 1848, and their early development was intertwined. Many Spiritualists were suffragists, though of course not all suffragists were Spiritualists. Although historians of the American women’s movement have, for the most part, ignored this pairing, the earliest historians of suffrage—and its first leaders—were well aware that “the only religious sect in the world . . . that has recognized
the equality of woman, is the Spiritualists.”121 The History of Woman Suffrage, compiled by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in the 1880s, paid homage to the movement, writing that Spiritualists “have always assumed that woman may be a medium of communication from heaven to earth, that the spirits of the universe may breathe through her lips.”122 The History went on to recount the testimony of a person “familiar with Spiritualism since its beginnings in 1848,” who “has known but very few Spiritualists who were not in favor of woman suffrage. All their representative men and women, and all their journals advocate it, and have always done so; that expressions in its favor at public meetings meet with hearty approval, and that men and women have spoke on their platforms, and held official places as co-workers in their societies.” Most striking to this nineteenth-century observer was that all of “this has taken place with very little argument or discussion, but from an intuitive sense of the justice and consequent benefits of such a course.”123

Chicago’s Spiritualist newspaper, the Religio-philosophical Journal, was not alone when it announced itself “a stalwart advocate of woman’s rights.”124 Boston’s Banner of Light regularly featured editorials and writings on “the rights of woman.” It endorsed legislation like the 1859 bill before the New York State legislature that ensured married women better protection of their property and earnings, calling it “this salutary and most humane measure.”125 Unlike many champions of women’s rights, Spiritualists called for more than guarantees of property protection, suffrage, or citizenship. Spiritualists constructed a unique politics of the body, claiming sexual rights—especially “voluntary motherhood”—and focusing on dress, diet, and health. During an 1865 Spiritualist convention in Chicago, Dr. Juliet Stillman declared that “the great demand of the day was health.” According to the conference report, she “ridiculed the idea of women going to the polls in a fashionable dress” and argued that women needed to reform their own bodily habits to strengthen themselves for citizenship. Stillman felt dress reform should take precedence over suffrage itself.126

Spiritualists like Juliet Stillman distinguished themselves from both suffragists, who directed their energies toward securing women’s public rights as citizens, and male health reformers, like Sylvester Graham or Orson Squire Fowler, who attended to the body without seeking to change society.127 Many practiced abstinence or moderation in food and drink, and many mediums were vegetarians. Arguing that animal food was injurious to health, they crafted a vegetarianism that was advocated as both a “better influence on the nervous system” and an aid to spiritual development.128
The ghost of Sylvester Graham, the inventor of the graham cracker, was a frequent visitor to spirit circles. One medium, Mary E. Frost, regularly channeled his spirit. However, Graham apparently held much more radical social views in death than he had in life. His regimen stressed a mainly vegetarian diet, built around the staples of fresh, cold water and graham crackers or bread; abstinence from all stimulants, including coffee, tea, and alcohol; and limited and controlled “amorous reveries.” Through Frost, Graham counseled the faithful to avoid fried foods, pork, liver, mushrooms or any other fungi. In one séance, however Graham quickly dispensed with advice about meat and mushrooms and turned instead to the rights of women and the unlikely topic of marital rape: “That which is a horrible crime, deserving a decade in State Prison when found without the cover of a marriage certificate, is no crime under such cover, but one of the rights secured by marriage; and if a poor victim appeals to the public, even to her sex . . . she is only treated with scorn, and told that it is good enough for her; the law would not protect her though her life were destroyed in a few months by the treatment which, if not covered by a marriage certificate, would send her murderer to prison or the gallows.”

Needless to say, this voice is hardly Graham’s. But the occasion to speak on diet and the care of the self brought the medium, Mary Frost, to a subject quite beyond, though intimately related to, the theme on which her spirit might have held forth: the protection of the body, particularly the body of the married white woman. In this jeremiad, the dangers of excessive consumption were displaced by the dangers of excessive and uncontrolled (male) sexuality. Linking the private concerns of dress, diet, and health reform with public demands for citizenship and reform of the marriage laws recapitulated the Spiritualist ethos uniting spheres of belief and action. It also pointed to the failure of the abstracting logic of liberal suffragism to address the complex embodied desires and concerns of many nineteenth-century Spiritualist feminists. At the same time, orations like Frost’s highlight the ways in which Spiritualist speech itself stretched the limits of rational discourse.

As mediums, women were able to take center stage as public speakers; once there, they did not always confine their speech to spiritual matters. Spiritualism offered women more than leadership positions or even a constrained cultural power. By 1860, it functioned, in the words of the medium Cora Wilburn, as a “release from the dominion of the senses, . . . liberty from the bondage of the passions of the body, . . . and the resurrection of the soul life of love.” Trance speaking and mediumship offered the possibility of disem-
bodiment and a kind of purifying transfiguration and release from the earthly, sexualized body. At the same time, as a political practice, Spiritualism functioned as a material reform movement. In performing or speaking “out of body,” as well as by championing reform causes such as alternative healing and dress reform, Spiritualists created a religious and social movement based on a reimagining of the corporeal. Indeed, the Spiritualist press became a site for a national conversation about female sexuality, particularly feminist critiques of bourgeois marriage, calls for voluntary motherhood, and discussions of free love. It is these conversations, as well as the radical antinomianism and individualism of the movement, that led to a split between many suffragists and their typically more radical Spiritualist sisters after the Civil War.

PEACE DURING WARTIME

If there was one way in which nineteenth-century Spiritualists distinguished themselves from most Americans, it was in their insistent, often strident pacifism. This attitude was intimately connected to Spiritualist religious practice and communion with the dead. Beginning before the Civil War, and for decades thereafter, Spiritualists pressed the cause of peace. In so doing, they stood almost alone in mid-nineteenth-century culture. In the 1898 “50th Anniversary Edition” of the Banner of Light, the president of the National Spiritualists’ Association declared pacifism and anti-imperialism as the great Spiritualist projects of the new century.133

For many Spiritualists, peace had been one of the great causes of the “old” century. On the eve of the Civil War, in January 1861, the lead editorial in the Banner of Light conceded that “our mode of government, apparently, is in a state of dissolution.” In recognition of the possibility of the final abolition of slavery, he went on to argue that the country could “now go forward with all the silence—comparatively speaking of course—of peace and harmony.”134 However, on April 13, 1861, the day after Confederate guns opened fire on Fort Sumter, the Banner sermonized in lead editorials that “in this day it would be a long standing disgrace to either side, that civilized political communities could not dissever former relations without proceeding to war.”135 Eventually the Banner ended its cries for peace, lamenting that “the Past is all closed up; we can only hope and labor every one of us, that it may stand for a still prouder and more noble future.”136 The Herald of Progress issued a different pronouncement on the war, declaring a unanimity among Spiritualists belied by the range of opinion in its own pages: “Unanimity, enthusiasm, and unswerving fidelity to the government, and an abandonment of
all party divisions and animosities, characterize the manifestations of popular feeling everywhere," declared an April 1861 *Herald* editorial.\textsuperscript{137}

Spiritualism had a newly important role to play during the war. The massive dislocation, loss, and grief accompanying the Civil War called for new forms of communication and consolation, both of which the Spiritualist movement provided. Those with loved ones at war, as one Spiritualist described it, “were thrown into an impressionable state, in which the longing desire predominated to hear from the beloved ones who had gone before. Spiritualism was at hand with its words of comfort and consolation. It cheered those who put their faith in its teachings, and took from death the rudest and most hideous of its features. . . . Death never was so generally thought of and talked of among the people; and by that very way was Spiritualism to gain a foothold in the public heart from which nothing would be able to shake it.”\textsuperscript{138}

Even accounting for the hyperbole of partisanship, Spiritualist and non-Spiritualist sources alike attest to the growth of the movement during the Civil War. Emma Hardinge wrote of Spiritualism’s “triumphant flourishing amidst the disruptions of war and national agitations, that were calculated to sweep every institution not founded upon some constituent element in human nature out of existence.”\textsuperscript{139} She stressed Spiritualism’s role not merely as a source of consolation to the bereaved, but also as a means of understanding the conflicts that drove the country to war. “And so people still seek Spiritualism,” Hardinge argued, “not only to comfort them in the bereavement of the war by its phenomenal communion, but because its just and reasonable doctrines clearly point to the cause of the nation’s failure, and its source of reconstructed health, namely, the supremacy of just laws on earth, as in heaven.”\textsuperscript{140}

The language of reconstruction infused Spiritualist writing, as well as the larger political culture, before Reconstruction itself. Many Spiritualists believed that the political slate-cleaning induced by the war had opened up new possibilities for making “all things new” again. One Spiritualist proposed that as “war’s confusion” gave “place to new visions,” it was now “a fitting time to commence in earnest some great and noble work—some work that shall challenge the attention of the world. The mind of man cannot remain inactive. When the excitement of the war is quelled, what shall next attract the public mind?”\textsuperscript{141} The answer, for many, was a global, pacifist movement.

In February 1866, the *Banner of Light* called for all, “irrespective of sex, color, creed, nationality or residence” to assemble and “exchange fraternal
expressions of sentiment, to consider what ought to be done in behalf of the Peace cause, and, if practicable, to organize a new uncompromising, vigorous and well ordered movement against the war system, on the force among mankind, between individuals, families, communities, states and nations."142 Organizers imagined and described a “radical peace movement” that would connect multiple issues ranging from the “Woman Question” to the “Indian Question.” The Universal Peace Society, as it came to be called, argued in its organizing document that “there is no peace, and can be none while the conditions of war remain.”143 Maintaining that “war is opposed to the inalienable rights, of life, liberty and pursuit of property,” it also called for an International Court of Arbitration.144

As some Spiritualists stressed internationalism and a more general idea of the rights of man, others invoked Spiritualist cosmology as its own justification for peace. The séance circle, with its emphasis on balance between “negative” and “positive” forces, corresponded with many Spiritualists’ support of equality between the sexes as well as their often expansive understanding of masculinity and femininity, which sometimes transcended the sexed body. Women of masculine mind and men of feminine character played a particularly powerful role in Spiritualist practice. Above all, the Spiritualist emphasis on balance often translated into calls for peace. “Balance is the need, not destruction and rooting out,” argued one Spiritualist.145 Spiritualists invoked the language of balance in their hopes for society as well as in descriptions of their own spirituality, and they called over and over again for a peaceful body politic. “The experiment of masculine rule has been tried long enough,” wrote the Spiritualist Thomas Hazard in 1868. “Six thousand years of war, bloodshed, hypocrisy and crime have pronounced it a gross failure. It is high time that the feminine element was called to its aid.”146 The “feminine element,” as Spiritualists typically formulated it, included both the empowerment of women and a societal ideal of a peaceful, cooperative, nurturance equated with femininity, which could also function as an essentialist recapitulation of “true” womanhood. Often both possibilities coexisted in any given formulation of the Spiritualist feminine element.

Spiritualists analogized from cosmology to politics, uniting the spiritual and material, the public and private. And if the private could be made public, the local could also be made national and international, as Spiritualists across the country wrote to and for one another, read each other’s words, met at conferences and camp meetings, and joined together in the remaking of the nation. Two years after the Civil War, the Spiritualist Payton Spence described his spiritual compatriots as those who “do nothing after the old
fashion, and seem determined that old things shall pass away and all things become new.”147 This biblical call from Revelations to make “all things new” marked an enduring utopian impulse in American culture, one to which Spiritualists gave new voice in the 1860s and beyond.

Despite the restitution of peace, the decades that followed the Civil War were marked by vast accumulations of wealth, sharpening class differences, and enormous poverty. However, the “Gilded Age” also saw the persistence of utopian strivings, charismatic perfectionisms, and spiritual radicalisms.148 As the historian Alan Trachtenberg has asked of the period: “Was the true America best represented by its most successful citizens, those for whom laws protected the private means of employment—private property and contract—and permitted accumulation of private wealth? Or did utopian ‘America’ demand for its realization a new social order, the abolition of private property, the emergence of the nation as a collective body of shared wealth as well as culture?”149 In the space between successful America and utopian America, Spiritualists imagined a different nation.

Nineteenth-century American Spiritualists looked simultaneously forward and backward. Spiritualist speeches, writings, and philosophy from the 1860s through the 1880s display, with very few exceptions, an enormous faith in progress. Spiritualist cosmology was structured by a series of teleologically ordered spheres through which evolved souls could hope to advance. Even as they looked fervently forward, Spiritualists were drawn by their social imagination and perfectionist leanings back to the remembered radicalisms of the antebellum years. “They were radical in every way, and hospitable to novelty of all kinds,” William Dean Howells wrote in the late nineteenth century of the residents of the Ohio town of his youth. “I imagine that they tested more new religions and new patents than have ever been heard of in less inquiring communities. When we first came among them they had lately been swept by the fires of spiritualism... They were ready for any sort of millennium, religious or industrial, that should arrive.”150 Howells remembered Spiritualism as “rife in every second house in the village, with manifestations by rappings, table-tippings, and oral and written messages from another world through psychics of either sex, but oftenest the young girls one met in the dances and sleigh-rides.”151

Howells’s recollections of this ferment accord well with historians’ understanding of that period.152 What confounds traditional historical characterizations is the persistence of a vision of a new America in the Reconstruction years. The historian Robert Wiebe, in analyzing the contested nature of American society, argues that ostensibly competing political visions actually
rarely competed; rather, they constituted parallel visions, which themselves characterized a generally “segmented society.” Wiebe states: “A properly ordered society, therefore, would comprise countless isolated lanes where Americans either singly or in groups, dashed like rows of racers towards their goals. What happened along other tracks might be a matter of intense interest for competitors, for they were all sprinting there, but it was seldom a matter of emulation. Each lane, resting a unique virtue, would trace a unique experience.”

A cultural “segment,” then, could coexist alongside another segment, the two barely noticing one another’s existence.

Only in the later historical chronicling would one of these segments emerge as “culture” and the other as “counterculture,” one as the “public,” the other as a “counterpublic.” As Nancy Fraser has argued in an attempt to complicate and democratize Jürgen Habermas’s notion of a public sphere, “The bourgeois public was never the public. On the contrary, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose of host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women’s publics, and working-class publics.”

Spiritualism after the Civil War, however, constituted neither Wiebe’s model of a “unique” or “isolated” track toward an ideal American life nor any kind of “public” containable in Fraser’s implicitly secular formation. For just as Spiritualists’ lives, both private and public, were still centrally occupied by spirits from the afterworld, their political convictions and affiliations challenged the Gilded Age’s ideas about an “ordered society.”

Despite the intense desire on the part of a coterie of industrialists and politicians to create a coherent national culture, the country remained striated by the conflicts of the prewar years. In 1867, the year closely most associated with “Radical Reconstruction,” Payton Spence could not describe his community as “revolutionary” without also acknowledging growing public opposition to the radicalism of Spiritualists. “Spiritualism,” Spence wrote, “is profoundly radical and revolutionary in all of its movements. This is evident to the most casual observer; and it is this fact which, more than any other, has excited the most alarm, apprehension, and hostility in the public mind.”

Postwar political retrenchment resulted in a climate increasingly hostile to spiritual freethinkers.

Although the Reconstruction years marked one of the most genuinely revolutionary periods in American history, culminating in the fulfillment of the decades-long struggle by African Americans for full citizenship, the 1870s ended in financial crisis and a large-scale political retrenchment that resulted in new forms of racial and legal discrimination. By 1867, Congress had crafted
a series of laws, including the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution and the Reconstruction Act of 1867 enshrining African-American suffrage in federal law, which was passed in an override of President Andrew Johnson’s veto. Together, these laws enfranchised the freedman and provided federal power to enforce the new legislation. Civil rights for African Americans marked a new stage in a political revolution, the outcome of which was far from inevitable before the War. Indeed, as a writer for the *Nation* declared in February 1867: “Six years ago, the North would have rejoiced to accept any mild restrictions upon the spread of slavery as final settlement. Four years ago, it would have accepted peace upon the basis of gradual emancipation. Two years ago, it would have been content with emancipation and equal rights for colored people without extension of the suffrage. One year ago, a slight extension of the suffrage would have satisfied it.” Implicit in this history are both amazement at the pace of progress and a silent suggestion that perhaps too much had changed too quickly.

African Americans gave their own meanings to freedom as they rebuilt families, founded new communities, and exercised their new rights. In the fall of 1867, between 70 and 90 percent of eligible freedmen used their voting rights in every state in the South, and a total of 265 African Americans were elected as delegates to state constitutional conventions. At the same time, a backlash developed in both the South and the North, reacting to the gains of African Americans and an inchoate sense that things had gone too far during the Reconstruction years.

The Spiritualist publications with the broadest circulation during the antebellum years were uniformly abolitionist. The proceedings from the Garrisonian American Anti-Slavery Society received regular column space in Andrew Jackson Davis’s *Herald of Progress* during the 1860s. In 1862, the *Banner of Light* printed the Emancipation Proclamation in full on the front page (a space typically devoted to “spiritual news”) under an unusually large and bold headline: “Freedom of the Slaves in Rebellious States on the First day of January next.” It published a separate editorial backing full citizenship for African Americans.

After the war, however, some Spiritualists sounded more like radical carpetbaggers than former Garrisonian abolitionists, seeing in a reconstructed, free-soil South new opportunities for “enlightened” capitalism. “Northern men do not yet see the great field for labor, and even for money-making on a most liberal scale, which is opened to them by the possession of the cotton-fields of the Southern States,” declared a *Banner of Light* editorial in 1864. “Land [should be] leased out to men who are accustomed to work and know...
how to till the soil themselves. . . . These farmers, thus leasing the lands, would at once proceed to hire the blacks, not enslave them—pay them good wages, and finally buy the farms outright when the Government proceeds to put in force its Confiscation law."160

It is, however, difficult to measure which Spiritualism was the Spiritualism, and whether it was the reformers or the consolidators who best characterized the movement as a whole. Clearly, multiple Spiritualisms coexisted, and individual Spiritualists represented a range of religious and political viewpoints.

Following the war, white Spiritualists were increasingly cast as “wild-eyed, long-haired reformers” out of step with their time.161 In some ways this was nothing new. Since the birth of Spiritualism in 1848, the popular press had published numerous articles denouncing believers as fanatics and dupes. Many of these were reprinted or refuted in the Spiritualist press. The Herald of Progress reprinted a damning piece from Hall’s Journal of Health in 1864, which linked Spiritualism to all other radical “isms,” asking, “But how is it when we meet a vegetarian, he is almost sure to be a phrenologist, a free lover, a root doctor, a woman’s rights [sic], a mesmerist, a Spiritualist, a socialist, a cold waterist, a ranting abolitionist, an abnegator of the Bible, the Sabbath day, and the religion of his father?”162 An editor of the Herald, probably the prominent male medium and theologian Andrew Jackson Davis, responded, arguing that “One-idea-ism is no finality, and every advocate of a single reform idea, is sure, ultimately, to become a true Cosmopolitan Reformer. . . . And as for the danger from extreme views, the Doctor forgets that not a page of his journal, but would at some day have been regarded as ‘extreme.’”163

The fact that this Herald editor countered the skepticism of Hall’s Journal of Health in a discourse of dialogic reason was hardly a rhetorical innovation for Spiritualists, as they had always understood science as part and parcel of their practice. What is unique about Spiritualism after the Civil War is the mode of its critics’ assaults, ranging from such mockery of coalitional affinities to a new denunciation of Spiritualists’ bodies and affects. The literary magazine Round Table likewise labeled Spiritualists “lank, long-haired and cadaverous,” morbid zombies, “fattening on the ignorance of the public.”164 The paradox of how the inherently “lank” come to “fatten” may simply be an effect of mixed metaphor; or it may illustrate the desire of the writer to construct these cadaverous subjects as at once threatening and irrelevant. Whereas antebellum critiques of Spiritualism pointed to the frailty, effeminacy, and suggestibility of mediums and their followers, postwar critics took on the “long-haired” believers as insufficiently masculine to embrace a reconstructed America and as overly identified with the dead subjects they conjured.
Whether male or female, prewar mediums were typically portrayed as lively in their channeling; the Spiritualist of the 1860s and beyond increasingly came to stand for an unnatural morbidity. Spiritualists’ seemingly aberrant interest in death allied them with the dark side of antebellum sentimentalism, while their radical social views thrust them further from the mainstream.

Attacks on Spiritualism were a reaction not only to general reform culture but also to the Spiritualist advocacy of specific and broad rights for women. A few Spiritualists recognized this issue right away. Lois Waisbrooker, an advocate of free love and a purveyor of frank sexual advice for women, was among the most radical of nineteenth-century Spiritualists. She wrote, edited, and published a weekly newspaper, Common Sense, out of Kansas from 1874 to 1875; a monthly journal, Foundation Principles, subtitled “The Rock upon Which Motherhood Should Rest,” from 1885 to 1894; and numerous novels. Her unblinking radicalism is best expressed in the frontispiece to one of her novels, which reads: “I demand unqualified freedom for woman as woman, and that all the institutions of society be adjusted to such freedom.” In her column in the Banner of Light, Waisbrooker argued that dismissals of Spiritualism were rebukes to female reformers, and vice versa. She wrote: “Another taunt against reformers comes in the following shape. Speaking of a lady lecturer in England, [a male commentator] says, ‘Judging from the description of this female apostle of infidelity, she must resemble some of the talking women in our own country, who advocate Spiritualism, and other delusions, preferring the light which is darkness.’”

In the eyes of its detractors, Spiritualism’s alliance with movements like women’s suffrage was proof of its danger. In 1855, a pseudonymous “Fred Folio” published a book-length tract attacking women’s rights and Spiritualism. Its rambling title said it all: A Book for the Times, Lucy Boston; Or, Woman’s Rights and Spiritualism: Illustrating The Follies and Delusions of the Nineteenth Century. Lucy Boston, a tale in which the curmudgeonly bachelor narrator, Amaziah Badger, is awakened by a spirit who admonishes him to help “the disenfranchised woman,” was a product of a small cottage industry of nineteenth-century Spiritualist satire. However derogatory in its aims, Lucy Boston made the link between Spiritualist religious and political tendencies in an unusually direct way.

Not all Spiritualists were political: many attempted to disentangle religion from politics, Spiritualism from radical reform. “Fanatical” Spiritualists came under fire from within their own ranks as more and more Spiritualists during the 1860s constructed their own “reasonable” or “rational” belief system, in direct contrast to supposedly irrational, unnatural Spiritualism. Typically,
this distancing involved associating a segment of Spiritualism with the political or religious excesses of the antebellum era and then contrasting the older Spiritualism with a new, more rational belief system. The *Banner of Light* editor Luther Colby announced the end of revivalism in 1866, decrying these gatherings as cultures of superstition and sites of fantasy and “unnatural ecstasy.” In their place, he offered a calm, rational, spiritual knowledge: “The charm of revivals . . . is gone. There was that mixture of superstitious awe and unnatural ecstasy about them, which secured wide and profound attention to them, as a general rule; but mankind is generally out growing its superstitions, and for the matter of spiritual ecstasies it prefers to put in their place something that has the texture of a firm spiritual knowledge and belief.”

Similarly, Emma Hardinge wrote to the *Banner of Light* in 1865 to defend the “just and reasonable doctrines” of Spiritualism from the “tangle of ‘isms’,” the “hobbies falsely labeled ‘Spiritualism’”—From the vastly momentous movement of ladies riding astride, and resolving the weal and woe of all future generations to depend on their wearing pantaloons . . . to the doctrine of ‘affinities,’ so prominently preached and practiced in the notables of New York.” As hard as some Spiritualists tried to untangle their Spiritualism from the array of other movements for freedom, the perfectionist taint was a difficult legacy to shed, precisely because the “tangle of isms” and the so-called hobbies falsely labeled as Spiritualism remained firmly held beliefs for many.

As the reformer and medium W. J. Colville argued: “When, in 1848, the Rochester knockings called attention to the fact that communication between the two states of existence commonly called the two worlds was a fact, the majority of investigators were solely intent on proving this rudimentary fact of spirit communion . . . but a fact, nevertheless, like all facts, when standing alone is inadequate to transform existing conditions of social life.” Colville, like many Spiritualists, was committed to transforming the material world while communing with the spiritual. Free love, as I discuss in chapter 3, tore Spiritualism apart in the 1870s. Spiritualists held multiple and divergent viewpoints on the “woman question.” Indeed, many individual Spiritualists held stances that were themselves rife with internal contradictions. Much of this tension turned on Spiritualist understandings of the body.

**Other Bodies, Other Worlds**

The radical individualism that characterized Spiritualism as a religious practice also structured individual Spiritualists’ notions of the “use” of the body. If the role of the feminine element was to guide the world to peace, it needed
to be nurtured in living bodies. This view had a number of implications. Spiritualists’ call for free, unfettered bodies translated into demands for everything from health and dress reform to spiritual marriage and free love. Spiritualists’ understanding of the feminine element (and the body) was a messy combination of expansive and conservative notions of womanhood, marked by race and class as well as gender. In a notion shared by generations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminists, Spiritualists saw middle-class white women as crucial to building a healthy society. To do so, these women needed to be strong.

“If women are to civilize us,” began the women’s rights advocate Warren Chase in an argument for full equality between the sexes, “we must begin by a better system of education and physical culture to have bodies as well as souls for American women.” “American” women, according to Chase and many others, could civilize society only if their bodies were strong enough to complete the task. “There is no use talking about religion with no flour in the house,” Chase continued, “and we say there is little use talking about women’s work and wages, with no physical strength to perform the work.” When Chase and other Spiritualists spoke of either the feminine element or “women,” they invoked their own middle-class, white Protestant sisters, wives, and daughters. These were the women whose bodies might vanquish the warlike masculine element. Spiritualists, for the most part, did not include either African American or white immigrant women in their notions of embodied citizenship. These other women could not provide the “innate” spirituality that would presumably civilize society. In this sense, they bore a striking resemblance to other middle-class white reformers and suffragists. However, Spiritualist practice offered other, less constricting notions of embodied womanhood.

Spiritualists had many interpretations of what bodily freedom for women and men might mean. As one reformer wrote in 1868 in a particularly strident call for free use of the body: “The uses of our physical bodies are to indulge in any enjoyment that affords us real comfort and happiness—any enjoyments that bring no stain hereafter. We have a right to do anything that is not repudiated by our own conscience. Are not the dictates of our own conscience sufficient to guide us in the right path of life?” Others saw an escape from the binds of the gendered, material body through disembodiment. Bodily transcendence was an accepted belief among Spiritualists, but, in true democratic, Spiritualist fashion, believers often asked the most mundane questions about this mystical and arcane practice. The “experts” at Spiritualist newspapers who answered questions took them all equally seri-
Figure 5. “Unidentified woman with male ‘spirit’ pointing upwards,” ca. 1861. William H. Mumler (photographer, American, 1832–84, active Boston, Massachusetts). Catalog no. 84.XD.760.1.4. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. The woman pictured here likely posed in Mumler’s studio, while the spirit, at left, appeared in the printed portrait.
ously. One Spiritualist wrote the *Banner of Light* to ask: “Is it possible for the spirit of the medium to commune with friends when apart from her own body?” An editor responded, “It is possible. Notwithstanding there is a sympathy kept up between spirit and body, yet the spirit itself is free to go wherever it wills; free, if it finds conditions adapted to its use, to employ them at any time or place, however distant.” One issue of the *Herald of Progress* provided answer to readers’ questions about spirit bodies, which included: How much does a spirit weigh? Can spirits see? Do they wear clothing? And do they reproduce as we do?

The somewhat childlike fascination and interest in the practicalities of the afterlife coexisted with another strain in Spiritualism. While believers kept newspaper editors busy with questions about the folkways of ghosts, Spiritualist mediums wrote of their own experiences “out of body”: leaving their own bodies while in trance state. Cora L. V. Richmond (née Scott) chronicled her voyage in *My Experiences While out of My Body and My Return after Many Days*. “It was true then,” she wrote, “I was suddenly and finally released from my body; ‘this time,’ I said, or thought: ‘I will not have to return.’ Many times, almost numberless, I had experienced the wonderful consciousness of being absent from my human form, of mingling with arisen friends in the higher state of existence, but, until this time I had always known that it was only for a brief season and that there was a tie—a vital and psychic tie—binding me to return to my earth form.” Richmond contended that “although not usual, this class of experiences is not so unusual as many imagine or assert.” The medium, having been from childhood accustomed to the “other state” of consciousness, could “distinctly trace her experiences in that inner realm as forming fully a third if not one-half her life experiences.” The realm of spirit in which she so often found herself was not an unfamiliar one; in fact, if called upon to decide which state was the real one, “‘the life,’ she would unhesitatingly say: the inner state, the super-mundane realm.” For Richmond and others, disembodiment produced another world “within and about us, revealing dormant powers within each person: Soul powers more active than perhaps any are aware! . . . It is of the Substance that dreams are made that we shall ultimately find our divinest realities, our very lives refashioned.”

While Spiritualists like Cora Richmond were refashioning their inner lives and constructing divine realities in new realms, others were constructing utopias in this world. Beginning in the 1850s and increasingly after the Civil War, Spiritualists traveled west to create new communities. For many groups of Spiritualists and utopians—the mystical disembodied mediums, the Spiritu-
alist organizers and editors, and the health-conscious seekers—California provided new and fertile ground. As early as 1857, Spiritualism was openly advocated by some “advanced thinkers” in California. Most prominent among these was “Colonel” Lyman W. Ransom, publisher of the Marysville Herald, who was an avowed Spiritualist, and one of his sons, Elijah, who was a medium. When the Banner of Light first made its appearance in that year, Colonel Ransom “scattered the newspaper among the people in the city of Marysville.” In San Francisco, séances were held in the 1850s at the house of Russell Ellis on Sansome Street, at the International Hotel, and also at the residence of J. P. Manrow on Russian Hill, where “the most remarkable manifestations” occurred.179

During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the Banner of Light regularly published letters from California Spiritualists, urging New Englanders to come West. “The interest in Spiritualism in this place seems to be rather increasing than otherwise,” wrote Margaret Booth to the Banner in 1862.180 “Just say, Mr. Editor, to these New England lecturers,” another Californian wrote in 1866, “that if they want to do a good thing and reap a rich harvest, materially and spiritually, the Pacific coast is the place for them.”181 Midwesterners made their own pitch. “Thinking that perhaps there are many good Spiritualists throughout the Eastern States who are desirous of emigrating to the far West, let me say we should like their company; and as Kansas is one of the most desirable localities of the West, having a congenial climate, with very rich and fertile soil, we invite them here.”182

Women soon emerged as central to California spirit circles, taking on an even greater prominence than they had in the East. Julia Schlesinger, the longtime editor of the Carrier Dove and later the Pacific Coast Spiritualist, chronicled the West Coast movement beginning in the late 1850s. The New England Spiritualist press regularly published columns by Schlesinger and other California Spiritualists.183 In November 1865, a “Friend of the Cause” wrote announcing that Mrs. Laura Cuppy, a suffragist, Spiritualist and long-time reformer for “progressive” causes, had arrived in San Francisco and was soon to take up permanent residency there. The writer noted: “Spiritualism is spreading rapidly in this coast, and I never saw anywhere such an eager desire to investigate the phenomenon and listen to its philosophy.”184

Julia Schlesinger recorded the first lectures on Spiritualism in San Francisco, given by Mrs. Eliza W. Farnham in 1859. Farnham also lectured in Santa Cruz in the 1850s with her “intellectual and energetic friend,” the former Brook Farm Transcendentalist Georgiana B. Kirby. In 1864 Emma Hardinge went west, where she lectured and organized meetings of the
Spiritualist “Friends of Progress.” She was soon joined by “Mrs. C. M. Stowe and Mary Beach, mediums, who arrived overland,” as well as the famed Cora L. V. [Scott Hatch Daniels] Tappan, and the feminist reformers Laura Cuppy, Laura De Force Gordon, and Laverna Matthews. Circles were instituted in San Francisco, San Jose, Sacramento, and San Diego.

It is particularly significant that California Spiritualists were building their movement at a time when Eastern Spiritualists complained that a lack of organization was impeding the movement’s growth nationwide. In 1867, the National Convention of Spiritualists met in Cleveland, Ohio, and prominent on their agenda was the problem of organization. “We have stood upon the platform of individuality for the past fifteen or sixteen years, and what have we done?” asked one Spiritualist. “Numbering as we do more than any sect upon the civilized earth, we have nowhere to lay our heads, whilst the most insignificant sect upon God’s footstool enjoys the advantage of beautiful churches and buildings for their use, wherever they desire them. Our forces are disorganized, scattered and so individualized, that they can accomplish nothing. Let us marshal and equip them for the contest between sectarian bigotry and free thought. Disintegrated, we can do nothing. United, what can we not do?”

For their part, Western Spiritualists organized, building institutions and a thriving Spiritualist press. Spiritualists who had been present in California since the 1850s reported a resurgence of interest after the Civil War. In 1867, they announced the birth of San Francisco’s Spiritualist newspaper, the Banner of Progress, an “exponent of liberal religion while denouncing revivalism and all dogmas and creeds.” “The Banner of Light is read with interest here, and our Banner of Progress is also growing into importance,” wrote a follower, who went on to say: “A very pretty idea is suggested in the names and location of these two papers: each a Banner of the Spiritual faith—one leading its army along the shores of the Atlantic, through the Eastern America, the other waving over the Pacific wing, and leading it gradually to the new faith, floating over the new America that sits so stately beside the sunset shore.” Despite the language of manifest destiny, however, the California Spiritualists struggled with each beachhead.

The San Francisco Banner of Progress, which survived for two years, was followed by Common Sense in 1874, published by W. N. and Amanda M. Slocum; it managed to survive a little longer than a year. The Philomathean, birthed in 1875, and the short-lived Light for All were followed by the Carrier Dove in 1883; it continued until the latter part of 1893, when its name was changed to Pacific Coast Spiritualist. Also inaugurated in the 1880s was the
Golden Gate, edited by J. J. Owen, the founder of the San Jose Mercury News, and his wife, Mattie P. Owen. In 1865, Spiritualists established a Children’s Progressive Lyceum in Sacramento, and in 1876 another in Oakland. The first Spiritualist society incorporated under the laws of the State of California as the “First Spiritual Union of San Francisco” in the same year. The “Golden Gate Religious and Philosophical Society” organized and incorporated in 1885, a year after the California “Spiritualists’ State Campmeeting Association” was founded by the irrepressible Julia Schlesinger and fellow traveler Frances Logan.

Back east, prominent Spiritualists preached conservatism, warning Californians to move more slowly. “The schemes set on foot by these reformers, are, in our estimation, entirely Utopian,” wrote the increasingly conservative Luther Colby in 1865. “Communities cannot be changed in a day or a year or a series of years. Reforms that are effective are necessarily slow in their culmination.” Some Eastern transplants found California lacking in the community so evident in the East. After discussing her incredibly arduous journey west, Laura De Force Gordon summed up her new home: “I have heard the same statement from other lecturers here, and I know whereof I affirm when I say to those lecturers in the states contemplating a trip to California, ‘You must expect to engage in the most thankless, soul-wearing work of your life, if you look to professed Spiritualists for aid, encouragement, or appreciation with a few noble exceptions.’” Despite these less than encouraging reports, Spiritualists flooded west in the years after the Civil War.

Spiritualists migrated to California for many of the same reasons as other nineteenth-century Americans, including greater economic opportunities and access to open land. However, they also came seeking a climate suited to bodily health and healing, as well as new spiritual frontiers. Spiritualist colonies grew quickly in the West and, to this day, still carry the mark of their origins. Summerland, a town near Santa Barbara, was named both for the Spiritualist term for the afterlife and for the local climate. Founded in 1888, Summerland advertised itself as perfect for those in “search of a quiet home where they can commune with mortals and immortals as freely as they may desire.” Summerland offered more than spiritual freedom: it also provided a salutary climate for invalids, a large class of nineteenth-century immigrants to California. As one partisan described it, Summerland afforded “great inducements to eastern people in poor health, for its invigorating climate, beautiful scenery, and life-giving magnetic forces are well adapted to the physical needs of invalids.”

The pursuit of bodily health with water cures and vegetarianism, as well as
the hope of abolitionism and perfectionist reform, waned for the most part in the East after the Civil War. However, Spiritualists, especially in California, found renewed optimism after the war, and some of that optimism was channeled into health reform. They merged a vision of social perfectionism in the outer world with the achievement of bodily health and wholeness within. Moreover, Spiritualist individualism melded well with the antielitism of self-help medicine first elaborated in the United States through Thomsonianism in the 1830s and 1840s. This popular health movement rejected the calomel and bleeding of “regular” physicians in favor of herbs, and replaced a belief in medical orthodoxy with Samuel Thomson’s slogan “Every man his own physician.” Spiritualists added psychic healing to the mix, and, because many Spiritualists were women, they sought to strengthen the weakened female body in order to further both individual spiritual development and societal health.

Some found new models for female empowerment in California. The Spiritualist Annie Denton Cridge left her home in Washington, DC, in 1871 for a new life on a Southern California citrus farm. Cridge envisioned her orange grove both as a means to fund the publication of her four-volume manuscript on the “rights of children” and “to demonstrate that the self-salvation of women lies in the culture of the soil.” Julia Schlesinger used her Spiritualist newspaper, the *Carrier Dove*, to campaign for women’s suffrage and economic self-sufficiency for women, arguing that “in order to be free women must be financially independent.” The soil of California provided new ground for a generation of Spiritualists, especially women, to build new communities and renew old political commitments. Yet the utopian vision of the Spiritualists, premised as it was on a forwarding-looking activism built on a radical, perfectionist past, placed them outside an emergent American ethos.

That Spiritualism’s radically individualistic, syncretic religious practice flourished into the late nineteenth century and beyond, casting roots into movements like Christian Science, Theosophy, and the New Age movement of the late twentieth century, points to the enduring appeal of eclectic, spiritually minded politics and transformative religious impulses. Nonetheless, in the years following the Civil War, the cultural fit between mainstream America and Spiritualism became less comfortable. During the 1870s, Spiritualists were targeted by doctors as hysterics, by suffragists as “irrational” citizens, and by moral reformers as purveyors of obscenity and vice.

Spiritualism provided a foil of the irrational against which both a growing scientific establishment and a postwar women’s rights movement defined
themselves. Although the early history of the American suffrage movement is filled with names of women who were suffragists as well as Spiritualists, a divide gradually widened between the two. At mid-century, the rare woman who spoke on public rostrums was often an abolitionist, suffragist, trance speaker, or all three; by the end of the century, women’s public speech had become more common. Many Americans began to fear that the country was at risk of being overrun, in Henry James’s words, by a growing herd of “vociferating women.” With all of the talk of suffragists being the worst offenders in an already “womanized . . . feminine, nervous, hysterical, chattering, canti-ng age,” mainstream feminists sought to differentiate themselves by adopting the rational speech of citizenships.199

By the 1870s, Spiritualists no longer occupied the center of the movement for women’s rights. It was at this historical moment that suffrage leaders began to distance themselves from their Garrisonian roots and their radical past and to relegate Spiritualism to the fringe of the women’s movement. Part of this move involved a reconstruction of female citizenship, shorn of the mystical, irrational, utopian politics of the antebellum era. What was lost in this remaking of the women’s rights movement was a place in American feminism for the transformative politics of the body imagined and enacted by Spiritualists.

Spiritualists were in the mainstream of their culture while also embodying certain values and qualities associated with the margin. Both feminized and largely female, the movement embraced a range of ways of inhabiting female gender and sexuality. At the same time, many Spiritualists identified more broadly with the “other”: male Spiritualists with femininity, white Spiritualists with Native Americans. These moves sometimes caused the movement to be cast as other by the broader culture. Yet Spiritualists were the other within: nineteenth-century American Protestants, mostly white and middle-class. These believers claimed mysticism for white America, creating a spiritual practice out of a communion with difference. Opening themselves to other voices and other bodies, they turned to the “vanished” Indian as a model for spiritual fulfillment.