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McGarry, Molly (2008) *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press. ISBN: 978-0-520-25260-8 (hbk). 288 pp. RRP: £16.95.

“A ghost is a visitation from the past to the present... it is worth asking why, in certain historical moments, people need to speak with the past”

(McGarry: 20).

Molly McGarry's *Ghosts of Futures Past* contends that the Spiritualist practice of communicating with the dead was more than trend and trickery. Instead, it “offered the potential for affective connection across time, personal transformation, and utopian political change” (pg 8). In her study of this popular 19th century religious practice, she explores how ghosts were thought to speak through mediums, typically young women, and how their words were heard as having both religious and political import. Further, despite the contemporary perception of Spiritualist belief as “an easily parodied parlor game or an apolitical and marginal mysticism,” she offers Spiritualism here as potentially, if not inherently, non-normative and anti-binaristic: “[calling] into question the very categories of the material and immaterial, knowledge and belief, the living and the dead” (p. 8).

McGarry's text is by necessity nuanced and complicated, as it engages the tension between the religious and secular in 19th century culture and politics. The complexity of her reading of extensive primary and secondary sources yields more than a straightforward historical account of Spiritualism. For example, while examining the troubling trend of ventriloquizing minoritarian figures, presented in Chapters 1 & 2, McGarry also maintains the possibility that the young women giving these ghosts a voice were able to utilize their own voices in unusual and transgressive ways. The radical potential that McGarry locates in Spiritualism, both bodily and temporal, thus offers an unexpected and powerfully suggestive queer archive, as well as an object lesson in the potential to be found in such overlooked archives. By taking the impulse to



speak to the dead seriously, she opens the reading of Spiritualism to contemporary queer scholarship, allowing her to analyze the ways in which the Spiritualist movement functions in relation to contemporary desire for the words and wisdom of ghosts.

Situating the beginning of Spiritualist practice in 1848, the same year *The Communist Manifesto* was published, McGarry makes it clear that she is interested in Spiritualism as more than a “cultural footnote,” and in haunting as “more than a dead metaphor” (p. 1, 8). Drawing from Avery Gordon’s seminal *Ghostly Matters* (1997), the book is positioned as part of a recent body of work being pursued in relation to ghosts/the ghostly/ghosting in fields of queer and critical race scholarship. It insists on the importance of “taking the lived experience of being haunted seriously” (p. 8). While the book does expose the techniques used by Spiritualist mediums and photographers, showing the proverbial man behind the curtain, McGarry is not merely interested in finding out the tricks and lies which made Spiritualism possible. Rather, she endeavors to take Spiritualism and its followers seriously regardless of the truth of the mediums’ words. This, in turn, allows her to delve into the question which drives her research: “why, in certain historical moments, people need to speak with the past,” and what can be gained from these ghostly voices (p. 20).

McGarry gestures toward the answer to these questions in the five chapters that follow. In Chapter 1, “Mourning, Media, and the Cultural Politics of Conjuring the Dead,” she outlines the history of emerging Spiritualism and its crucial figures in more detail. The historical context of the movement is illustrated both in the concurrent development of technologies such as photography and the telephone, and in the distanced temporal and ideological position it held from the Victorian culture of mourning. Following the introduction of the mediums with those purportedly speaking through them, Chapter 2, “Indian Guides: Haunted Subjects and the Politics of Vanishing,” then explores the implications of the persistent channeling of Native American ghosts by Spiritualist mediums. While this practice clearly exploited the popular conception of Native American spirituality, McGarry notes that Spiritualists were also vocal and active in advocating for the assertion of Native American rights. Her careful presentation of such seemingly contradictory stances speaks to her interest in the radical potential of Spiritualist practice, rather than a flat critique.



In Chapter 3, “Spectral Sexualities: Free Love, Moral Panic, and the Making of U.S. Obscenity Law,” the creation of obscenity law is explored as a reaction to the non-normative Spiritualist ideals of gender and sexuality. The latter were widely circulated in Spiritualist periodicals and newsletters and spoke directly to the non-Spiritualist fear of possession and the dangerous permeability of the home. These dangers are further explored in Chapter 4, “Mediomania: The Spirit of Science in a Culture of Belief and Doubt,” through the relationship of Spiritualist mediums and medicine in the emerging nineteenth century discourse of abnormality and mental health. Importantly, Spiritualist mediums were historically pathologized as akin to hysterics, which McGarry utilizes to account for the therapeutic interest in the psyche and soul. This Foucauldian turn to the institution casts Spiritualist practice in a new light and offers a glimpse of the movement’s future fall from popularity to parlor game. Chapter 5, “Secular Spirits: A Queer Genealogy of Untimely Sexualities,” explicitly finds the potential for queer Spiritualism in “the more uncanny, the more spectral sexualities that haunt the queer past,” as embodied in oft-claimed queer ancestors Walt Whitman and Radclyffe Hall (p. 175). It is in this last section that McGarry casts a new light on the book’s discussion by stressing the potential to be found in speaking with dead voices, positing that Radclyffe Hall’s famous Stephen Gordon, commonly read as a queer ancestor, is therefore made “a martyr to the future” (p. 175).

While Chapters 1-4 present a complex and thorough historical analysis and offer political and theoretical implications of Spiritualism, in questioning the book’s relationship to its use of dead voices, Chapter 5 explicitly unlocks the wider relevance of the book, not only as a non-normative history, but to the practice of queer theory. Though she is reading for a queer understanding of this movement, McGarry writes against the “persistent urge to find queer ancestors before there was anything like a queer history to recover them” (p. 175). Therefore, this last chapter of the book functions as a beautiful and subtle critique of queer genealogical impulses and the now common urge to offer queer predecessors as “martyr[s] to the future” (p. 175). Using Whitman and Hall, both of whom had an interest in Spiritualist ideologies, McGarry underlines the parallels between the potentially troubling Spiritualist tendency to speak for minoritarian figures through the mouths of young white women, and the contemporary impulse



to hear the equivalent of contemporary queerness in the work of writers like Whitman and Hall. McGarry is not seeking to ventriloquize here, but rather to locate these writers' own interest in Spiritualism in relation to their own queer present.

According to McGarry, the research for this book was impelled by an attempt to make sense of the politics of mourning necessarily engaged by scholars and activists in the AIDS pandemic. "Spiritualists felt the burden of the present, and the call of both the future and the past... Spiritualist practice collapsed time and refused to accept the past as over" (6); McGarry is looking to Spiritualist practice to make sense of the shocking losses caused by AIDS, and the political and perhaps spiritual impulse to let the dead speak. In fact, in recounting Spiritualist practice and writing for voiceless ghosts, McGarry herself can be seen to become a Spiritualist practitioner. However, by enabling her ghosts to speak to their own present, she allows and maintains a productive, provocative tension in her reading of Spiritualism; her interest is not in making any more martyrs. This temporal collapse and the desire for the voices of ghosts to speak to the present is used to explore Spiritualism's relevance to contemporary queer scholarship and experience. It is portrayed as, "a spiritual [theory] of embodiment and [form] of materialization that offered what secular science refused: transfigurative affiliation, consolation, and connection" (176). Ultimately, these are fundamental comforts that, in today's world can- crucially- still be heard and understood.

References

Gordon, Avery (1997) *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.