

Crossing over: spiritualism and the Atlantic divide

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A joke has it that spiritualists first crossed the water in order to get to the other side. Despite its obvious shortcomings, it does suggest a more serious imperative: the investigation of how reading nineteenth-century spiritualism within a transatlantic context might be a highly revelatory activity, might indeed reveal something more interesting than we have hitherto considered about what crossing the Atlantic meant to spiritualists. Nineteenth-century spiritualism is routinely described as a phenomenon that originated in the United States and spread first across the Atlantic and then world-wide. In this essay I will argue that a transatlantic focus challenges existing orthodoxies and suggests new areas of investigation. Yet in describing this agenda for reading spiritualism I am conscious that this chapter asks more questions than it answers (and may, at times, seem to raise issues and give examples only to move elsewhere).

Though many American and British spiritualists were more interested in the site of the seance, and the revelations it might contain, rather than its cultural origins, the same cannot be said for many historians of spiritualism. A number of historians have argued that spiritualism emerged in America as a discrete cultural phenomenon which needs to be read within its American context in order to make sense of its myth of origin – the ‘Rochester rappings’ of 1848. In such interpretations, American spiritualism is read as a culturally specific form that arises from a number of local geographical, cultural and political factors.¹ Such an approach, however, does not sufficiently account for the complexities of spiritualism’s inheritance; it does not consider the heterogeneity of a movement that draws from both sides of the Atlantic, and from European Christian traditions as well as Native American religious practices and, crucially, from the religious beliefs of slaves. Readings of spiritualism that concentrate upon its indigenous form provide a significant and compelling advance on the

serious scholarship that has been done on spiritualism to date. Yet they still fall short of explaining some of the phenomena associated with it such as the regular appearance of black and Native American spirits to white mediums.

I believe that we need to question why spiritualism crossed the water and established itself as a popular and successful form in Britain as quickly as it did. Much existing work on nineteenth-century British spiritualism has also resisted that question, though these are still early days in that particular area of investigation.² If we ask this, then we also need to look again at how spiritualism ‘started’ in the first place, and to ally our findings to theoretical models of how aspects of culture can be said to originate and spread. Further, I would add that investigations of this order are able to enrich our understanding of the spread of cultural phenomena in the modern period. Such investigations would reveal, of course, that the notion of spread or diffusion is highly complex, though the notion that cultural drift and spread resists specific and delineating chronologies is hardly revelatory.

With specific regard to spiritualism, Logie Barrow questioned the established wisdom of the accepted account of origins in England that has been propounded by some cultural historians. In his insistence on some of the characteristics shared between England and America – a profound interest in self-education, and some shared religious groups or sects with belief systems that anticipated spiritualism (such as the Shakers) – he argues that the chronology and geography of early spiritualism and its spread has been misrepresented. He insists, rightly I think, on the complexity of the relation between a series of sometimes loosely related phenomena that seemed to focus, for a moment, upon spiritualism. As he writes:

very broadly, we should talk less in terms of lines of descent than of points of blur and tension between, say, Owenism, herbalism, Swedenborgianism, mesmerism, Methodism, Chartism and other isms.³

If we follow Barrow’s injunction to consider conjunctions, blurs and tensions then we open up a hugely rich vein of investigation for future work on the area. There’s much exciting work to be done to add to the scholarship that already exists, most particularly, in the area of the black Atlantic, and in the representations and interventions of race within spiritualism.⁴ What this argument implies is that it is crucial to pay even closer attention to the origins and forms of spiritualism than has been done to date. This is to take issue, for a while in any case, with Daniel

Cottom's argument that the meaning of spiritualism is more significant than its origins, or, as he puts it:

we must acknowledge that the issue of empirical verification has no necessary precedence over the issue of meaning, which may actually constitute a telling critique of the tendency to identify empiricism with truth. I am not so concerned with the origins of spiritualism, then – the Fox sisters in upstate New York, Mrs. W.R. Hayden's first visit to England, Daniel Dunglas Home's incursions into France and Russia – as I am in the cultural appeal and power, the evident meaning, that this movement proved to have.

Instead I'm suggesting instead that the origins of spiritualism themselves help to elucidate its meaning, as well as the 'experiences, discourses and practices' that primarily interest Cottom in his work on spiritualism and surrealism.⁵ Accounts of origins may well be highly significant in defining and suggesting the range of experiences that go into producing the discourses and practices of spiritualism. They may, to put it another way, be indistinguishable from each other in key areas. If this is true then we ignore them at our peril. Yet here it is appropriate to echo Cottom's cautionary note about the difficulty of writing about such a large and diverse movement under a single term. A wide range of persons and activities are subsumed within the word 'spiritualism'. As I have already suggested, it is important to recognise that not enough work has as yet been done on the activities, for example, of black mediums working in the Southern states, which might alter existing histories of the subject. Many white mediums acknowledge their presence, often in passing, in their writings.⁶ New readings on the relations between such black mediums and Africanist religious belief systems might allow us to follow up possibilities of interaction between the activities of north-eastern white spiritualists and African-American southern spiritualists who came from quite different religious, political and ethnic backgrounds. (This is just one small example of the exciting possibilities of work in this area.)

These different types of spiritualism, or spiritualisms, might better be understood both within a context of origins and through more Atlanticist or circumatlantic readings, if we are to accept Joseph Roach's claim that it is in performance itself that origins can best be revealed. What this suggests is that (to come full circle) even if we concentrate on performance we find ourselves necessarily paying attention to origins. Yet if we start with origins we find ourselves shifting focus to performance in order to prove our hypotheses. As we pursue our investigations we must think through the significance and centrality of cultural memory, which may

help us to think through issues of performance and of origins in the same moment.

Central to such connections and arguments I have articulated so far is, of course, the possibility of travel. To think transatlantically involves investigating the possibilities of travel in the nineteenth century (and earlier too) and the relationships between slave trafficking on the one hand and movement of free peoples on the other alongside the development of religious and cultural practices in America. The phenomenal growth of nineteenth-century spiritualism was made possible by the emergence of new, modern modes of transportation, book and periodical publishing and communications. New technologies allowed mediums to travel within and between Britain and North America – even as far as Australia – to demonstrate their skills and publicise and market their writings. New technologies also, famously, provided metaphors by which supernatural occurrences could be described and understood. Telegraphy – which transformed transatlantic relations in the middle of the century helping to narrow and circumvent the space between America, Britain, and therefore its European neighbours – was used by spiritualists as a metaphor for the ways in which communications from the other world could be understood. The medium John Murray Spear explained the significance of electricity and telegraphy within his spiritual cosmos in the following way:

Between the Grand Central Mind and all inferior minds there subsists a connection, a telegraphic communication, by means of what may be called an Electric chain, composed of a greater or less number of intermediate links. The greater mind, being always positive to the lesser, can affect, impress, or *inspire* it.

The spiritual telegraph, much like its earthly counterpart, transferred messages from one place to another, invisibly and seemingly against reason, yet somehow it worked, demonstrably so. The wide comprehension of the relevance of such a metaphor is suggested by the fact that the most significant American spiritualist periodical of the 1850s, edited by Samuel Britten, was called *The Spiritual Telegraph*.⁷

Given the concurrence of the emergence of spiritualism and the growth of such new technologies it is useful to ask to what extent the Atlantic was a divide to the growth of and the aesthetic and cultural practices of spiritualism. That is to say, firstly, did the formal practices of spiritualism on each side of the Atlantic vary from each other to any significant degree, and to what extent is any variance determined by geographical specificity?

Secondly (to be more prosaic) to what extent did the Atlantic function as a divide to spiritualists on either side of it? Finally, did the Atlantic have particular and specific meanings for spiritualists? Might the Atlantic itself, and the possibility of spirit travel across and beyond it, even be invoked as a source of proof of the truth of spiritualism's claims? In the two cases I will outline below it seems that the divide formed by the Atlantic was certainly not insuperable, and in one case (that of the British novelist and spiritualist Florence Marryat) it became proof of the truth of spiritualism. Both Florence Marryat and my other subject, Emma Hardinge Britten, were able to cross the ocean and experience spiritualism on both sides of it. Though it is true that spiritualism emerged in the United States before it emerged in the form we associate with it in Britain, to say that without all sorts of provisos and hesitations is unwise. Marryat noted that she found the numbers of materialisations she experienced in the United States surprising. But she did not find the fact of materialisation novel, since they had started to be seen in England shortly after the first full body materialisation was experienced in the United States. There were contiguities between spiritualist experiences on both sides of the Atlantic, therefore, that deserve investigation. One of these is Florence Marryat's experience of materialised spirits in New York.

In her seminal work on spiritualism *There is no Death* (1891) Florence Marryat describes an incognito visit she paid to a New York seance in 1884 that left her a firm believer in spiritualism. The visit took place while she was in transit to a professional engagement in Boston, having travelled from England. She was already well known in her capacity as a novelist and a spiritualist, but also as the daughter of Captain Frederick Marryat whose novels, largely about the sea, had sold in huge numbers earlier in the century. Marryat writes that having arrived in New York with some time to spare before she left for Boston she decided to attend a seance. Looking in the local newspaper, she found an advert for a seance at which full body materialisations of spirits were to take place. Such materialisations were very popular among spiritualists: they seemed to bring the realities of the existence of spirits closer to them. Seeing the spirits of their dead ones before them in body form was of far greater comfort to many spiritualists that just hearing raps or receiving written messages could be. Marryat had attended many such seances in Britain already (a detail that is significant here) and had encountered the spirit of her dead daughter Florence a number of times. Florence had died shortly after her birth, but was readily recognisable to her mother by her cleft palate even when she appeared as a much older figure. Some spirits,

especially the spirits of very young children, grew older in the spirit world. In a previous manifestation she had appeared in the form of a girl of about seventeen years.⁸ Marryat arrived at the New York seance keen to use the experience as a test of the facts of spiritualism and also, perhaps, to have an experience of what seances were like on the other side of the Atlantic. Spiritualism had, historians agree, originally come to Britain from the United States. Might American spiritualism, as experienced over there, differ in some ways from British spiritualism? Marryat was keen to find out. In the New York seance she witnessed a series of materialisations that impressed her so profoundly by their sheer quantity that she sought a physical explanation for them. She found it in the climate, suggesting that ‘the dry atmosphere of the United States’ assisted whatever the process was that allowed for such transformations to take place.⁹ Yet it was not just the numbers of materialisations that impressed and convinced her. What struck her most was the appearance of a figure she had longed to see. The male conductor of the seance made an announcement that particularly interested her:

‘Here is a spirit who says she has come for a lady named “Florence” who has just crossed the sea. Do you answer to the description?’ I was just about to say ‘Yes’ when the curtains parted again and my daughter ‘Florence’ ran across the room and fell into my arms. ‘Mother!’ she exclaimed, ‘I said I would come with you and look after you – didn’t I?’

I looked at her. She was exactly the same in appearance as when she had come to me in England – the same luxuriant brown hair and features and figure, as I had seen under the different mediumships of Florence Cook, Arthur Cölman, Charles Williams, and William Eglington; the same form which in England had been declared to be half-a-dozen media dressed up to represent my daughter stood before me there in New York, thousands of miles across the sea, and by the power of a person who did not even know who I was. If I had not been convinced before, how could I have helped being convinced then?¹⁰

The appearance of ‘Florence’ convinces her mother through her resemblance to the figure she had seen in numerous seances in England, despite all that sceptics had told her about how she was being duped. Further, as the extract above shows, it is the fact that Marryat believed herself unknown in New York that convinced her. How could what she had seen possibly be fraudulent? As the seance continued, and the spirit of a friend appeared, providing her with additional proof (though by this time she was already persuaded) she found her conviction strengthened by the conductor of the seance. She continues:

I was more deeply affected than I had ever been under such circumstances before, and more deeply thankful. 'Florence' made great friends with our American cousins even on her first appearance. Mrs William's conductor told me he thought he had never heard anything more beautiful than the idea of the spirit-child crossing the ocean to guard its mother in a strange country, and particularly, as he could feel by her influence, what a pure and beautiful spirit she was. When I told him she had left this world at ten days old, he said that accounted for it, but he could see there was nothing earthly about her.¹¹

This experience of a seance on the other side of the Atlantic was clearly seminal for Marryat, particularly given the path that had taken her to it. When she was younger she had thought of contact with a world of the supernatural as something unmediated by others – in other words as something individuals experienced for themselves through seeing spirits or ghosts as they might call them, or having heightened spiritual awareness. This form of belief was one she claimed for her father; she gave an example of it in *There is no Death* when she described his own account of seeing the spirit of his brother while he was anchored off the coast of Burma.¹² The spirit told Frederick Marryat that he had died, and Marryat then recorded the exact moment this happened in his log. Later he claimed that this was indeed the time at which his brother had died. Florence Marryat gave an account of seeing spirits of her own in the years before she became a convert to spiritualism. While living in India with her first husband she saw spirits draped in white (so that she initially mistook them for Indians). While such experiences of the supernatural were geographically varied, as these examples show, her experience of visiting seances and consulting mediums had always been associated with America. It was, for example, when she visited an American medium in London in 1873 that her investigations into the spirit world became systematised and began to involve professional mediums. Though she consulted a number of British mediums while in London, she also went to the seances of American mediums based there, and entered into a transatlantic correspondence with an American medium in the late 1880s.¹³ Such transatlantic links were a characteristic of spiritualism from its very earliest days as accounts by Marryat and others show. Spiritualism was often characterised not just by social mobility but also by geographical mobility. By examining the experiences of two figures whose involvement in spiritualism took place on both sides of the Atlantic I will explore what transatlantic connections meant to spiritualists, and what they have meant, to date, to histories and historians of spiritualism. To do this is also

to suggest how such questions might enable us to think about and read spiritualism and international cultural exchanges in new ways and help us to come towards an answer to some key, though very simple, questions. Reading through a transatlantic focus leads to new understandings of its relation to modernity (in its widest sense) and to complex meanings, as well as helping us to think through issues of cultural contact and spread. If spiritualism is read in such a context it will, I believe, reveal itself as a fascinating case of American cultural imperialism, the spread of which is partly dependent on elaborate systems of marketing – such as the advertisement Marryat found, newspaper publications, public lectures and so on – that allowed spiritualists to treat their contact with the other world as a form of commodified entertainment, with specific markets and intended audiences. But it will also reveal its contingency on an amalgam of influences that were produced through the unique combination of cultural and ethnic encounters and engagements that characterise the history of America.

In their pioneering works on spiritualism in nineteenth-century England, Logie Barrow, Janet Oppenheim and Alex Owen all make passing, albeit differing, comment on the relation between the emergence of spiritualism there and the transatlantic visits of key American women mediums.¹⁴ In her seminal work *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1989), for example, Owen attributes the spread of spiritualism from America to England to the visits and proselytising of American mediums such as Mrs Hayden and Mrs Roberts. This argument follows the claims made four years earlier by Oppenheim in her book *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (1985), though in her account of transatlantic spread, Oppenheim had also included the figure of Daniel Dunglas Home, a Scottish-born migrant to the United States who had spent enough time there to be regarded by some as an American when he returned to England in 1855. Both Hayden and Roberts crossed the Atlantic in the early 1850s and were, as Owen puts it, ‘the forerunners of a steady stream of transatlantic visitors who helped establish a pattern of close ties between spiritualists in both countries’. ‘Transatlantic’ in this context appears to mean American. Owen supplements her argument by noting that when Harriet Beecher Stowe visited Britain, in 1853, abolition and spiritualism were ‘among the foremost topics of the day’.¹⁵ One observer wrote to her husband that ‘The great talk now is Mrs Stowe and spirit-rapping, both of which have arrived in England’.¹⁶ The notion of arrival is more fraught and problematic than this contemporary

commentator suggests, but for the moment I will use it without challenging it.¹⁷ The implied substitution (by Owen) of ‘American’ for ‘transatlantic’ is also problematic, as we will see. Indeed contemporary confusion about Home’s national identity (was he really British or American?) is very telling as it feeds into an area of debate about distinctive national characteristics and cultures that is at the heart of a significant portion of what has been written about nineteenth-century spiritualism. What is undisputed is that the story of nineteenth-century spiritualism is one that involves a crossing over from one nation to another, via the Atlantic. Though it spread beyond Britain and the United States, I will only be considering the transatlantic spread of spiritualism in its narrowest sense here.¹⁸ Though that crossing over has usually been read as being one way – from the United States to Britain – as the example of Florence Marryat shows (and others might back it up), it took place in both directions, from Britain to the United States too. The case of Emma Hardinge Britten will provide another way of reading such movements and, like that of Marryat, it will show the ways in which reading transatlantically can be a fruitful and elucidatory exercise

Emma Hardinge Britten was a hugely celebrated British medium and historian of spiritualism who spent many years of her life in the United States and married the spiritualist William Britten. Her most celebrated piece of work, *Modern American Spiritualism* (1870), is a seminal account of the emergence and spread of spiritualism within the United States. From any perspective, she is an important figure; from a transatlantic one she is crucial. Her autobiography attests to a life of significant mobility and activity, and an involvement in substantial development of spiritualism on both sides of the ocean. She is a figure who can be cast as a notable Atlanticist in terms of her own crossings of the Atlantic and her Anglo-American perspective. Like Marryat she had a strong feeling for the sea. Some of her most dramatic narratives, clearly intended as being proofs of her mediumship, tell of shipping disasters predicted and narrowly avoided by her. Like Marryat, who found considerable comfort (as well as evidence of spiritualism) in spirit messages from her sailor stepson and sailor brother, sailors played a part in Britten’s spiritual life. Her belief was underpinned by the superstitions traditionally associated with sailors and the sea. She wrote that her dead sailor brother (later a spirit guide for her) sent her the first message from the spirit world that convinced her of spiritualism.¹⁹ Her brother’s message, rapped out to her as she pointed a pencil at the letters of the alphabet, provided a proof to her that only she could have recognised. She laboriously spelled out a message that represented

both her brother's last words to her while still alive, and his first to her from the spirit world: '*Darling Emma, find a great sea snake for Tom*' [emphasis hers]. The message is a cryptic reference to two sea songs that he had particularly liked, and a reminder of the liminal or journeying life he had led.²⁰ Through making reference to that sort of a travelling life, it can also be read as a refutation of boundaries and fixities, including that of national identity itself. This confusion of national identity is also a key element of the story she tells about her own life.

Paul Gilroy has argued, famously, that the trope of the ship is especially important to the theorisation of the Black Atlantic.²¹ He writes, 'Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.' Here I am suggesting that, in the cases of Marryat and Britten, the invocation of dead sailor brothers – and their own connection with sea travel, mercantilism and colonial endeavour – allows us to start investigating the role of the Atlantic in the spread of spiritualism from America to Britain. Yet in parallel to this it is essential to look at the significance of the black Atlantic in the origins of spiritualism itself and then of its subsequent practices and performances. Marryat herself cites her father's experience of the supernatural (in an imperialist context) as being significant to her own development of an interest in spiritualism. His connection to the United States, to the West Indies sugar trade and to slavery should be noted. His grandfather, Thomas Marryat, a medic, had spent several years in the 1760s travelling and picking up work in America. His father, Joseph Marryat, was a Member of Parliament for Sandwich and a colonial agent for Grenada. He owned a significant amount of property in the West Indies that was dependent on slave labour. He married an American woman, Charlotte Von Geyer whose loyalist family had lost a great deal of money after the Revolution. Joseph Marryat was actively involved in the bill for the abolition of the trade in slave-grown sugar. His son's comments on the relative merits of free African-Americans in Philadelphia and the Afro-Caribbeans of 'our West India Islands' in his *A Diary in America* (1839) caused outrage in Grenada. A strong refutation of his remarks, in pamphlet form, was published in London, substantially comprised of a series of letters published in Grenada in the *Saint George's Chronicle*.²² One writer makes the claim that Marryat should be more circumspect in his comments since 'it is generally reported and believed, that Capt. Marryat is descended from a coloured ancestor of no very remote date, or exalted

rank. Whether this is correct or not, it is certainly true that questions about his ancestry were raised periodically by others too, even after his death.²³ Marryat served on the *Impérieuse*, which was involved in the defence of the castle of Trinidad against the French in 1808, and spent several years in ships in the West Indies, along the coast of the United States, and around Burma. The family's history was, then, profoundly enmeshed within the history of the black Atlantic, the politics and practices of slavery and also British imperialism. As we have seen, Florence Marryat herself lived in India for some period as the wife of an officer in the British army. The legacy of that period often broke out within seances: she claimed on a number of occasions to see Indian spirits, dressed in traditional clothes, materialise in front of her.

As well as a consideration of the black Atlantic when researching and understanding the politics and performances of spiritualism, it is also essential to examine the borrowings and influences that take place between spiritualism and indigenous religious practices in America. From the earliest moments of spiritualist historiography as written by spiritualists, the presence of Native American spirits and religious beliefs has been acknowledged as being significant to the formation and practices of spiritualism. Britten raises the centrality of Native Americans on a number of occasions in her autobiography, most strikingly, in a bizarre, apocalyptic vision she has on her final journey across the Atlantic to retirement in England, when the ship she is travelling on is just outside Liverpool. The encounter she 'sees' between Native American spirits (especially her own spirit guide 'Arrowhead') and the inhabitants of her birthplace in 'every town, city, village and street of England' suggests the radical juxtaposition of the American life she chose and the English life she eventually returned to.²⁴ Yet the vision also has its roots in a European tradition of religious mysticism and iconoclasm that marks it out as borrowing from both sides of the Atlantic. The association between spiritualism and Native American beliefs and spirits is long-standing on both sides of the Atlantic. The appearance of Native American spirits in the seances of British mediums needs to be read within the context of the politics of the representation and reception of key Native Americans who visited Britain from the early sixteenth century onwards. The most famous of these figures was Pocahontas who converted to Christianity, married an Englishman and died and was buried in England.²⁵

Pocahontas's 'conversion' from Indian to the Europeanised wife of an Englishman was more dramatic than Emma Hardinge Britten's transformation into the wife of an American man. None the less, Britten struggled

with the implications of her choice. A significant narrative running through her autobiography is about the relation between her 'Englishness' and the American life she finds herself leading. In certain key scenes within her autobiography moments of crisis about propriety and behaviour are linked to national identity and national characteristics. Citing her transition from actress to spiritualist lecturer (a fairly standard trajectory for many women spiritualists from Britain and America) she uses the language of propriety to describe an instance of crisis. She writes that she was 'absolutely assured' that she had to give up the stage through a series of spiritual sources even though she had one more week of a contract of employment to run. Yet despite being aware of the necessity to find new work she found it difficult to make a decision about what to look for. As she argues,

Thus whilst I seemed to be irresistibly impelled to refuse all the offers of theatrical engagements that were pressed upon me, I was no less averse to the thoroughly *un-English* idea of becoming a female preacher, as I designated the Spiritual rostrum speakers of my own sex. What, 'I! a *young English lady*, to go out like a bold, strong-minded woman to preach! Oh, shocking!' I cried, and so it appeared to the *weak-minded girl*, still under the influence of tyrant prejudices, and what were at that time old-world opinions.²⁶

There is no doubt that the notion of a 'bold, strong-minded woman' here means, literally, an American woman. In the British popular imagination of the period, as reinforced by fictional characterisations, American women were represented as having a number of freedoms (many associated with republicanism and the rights purportedly afforded to women) denied to British women. It is also clear that, given the career she would go on to have – one in which she became a celebrated trance lecturer – there's an affectionate self-denigrating joke going on here about beneficial acculturation. 'Old-world' here functions not just as a literal suggestion of a European mindset, but also of an oppressive anti-republican sensibility that fosters and demands obedience in women rather than independence and intellectual maturity. The slippage from '*lady*' to 'woman' and finally '*girl*' suggests the range of gendered categories available. Britten's crisis is accounted for as being not just about the difficulty of being an Englishwoman continuing within such a dubious public sphere, it is also a crisis about emotional commitment of a more personal kind. Her anguished deliberations culminated in her decision to return to a quiet life in England. A contributory factor was that she had a 'certain and somewhat solemn engagement'²⁷ in England, and a letter waiting from

her fiancé asking her to return home (presumably to lead a retired married life). She decided to write and confirm that she would be crossing the Atlantic and coming home. In her account of writing that confirmatory letter she invokes destiny and the intervention of the spirit world – two common devices of spiritualists – for a reply that seemed to be written without her volition. She intended to write that she would be back in England in a month's time, yet instead she finds herself writing something that would change her life forever. She describes what happens in the following vivid terms:

In place of making this announcement, however, I deliberately wrote, and that whilst in the full possession of my senses, a description of a very rich lady who had herself made my correspondent an offer of marriage. I told him of some heavy financial difficulties he was then in, and bid him at once marry the lady who had offered herself to him, and think no more of me, for *'I should never return to England for many long years to come.'*²⁸

Here, in her letter to her fiancé, she confirms her chosen status as an Englishwoman abroad, and one who has reversed the narrative of spiritualism's movement from West to East. She employs many tropes and rhetorical devices familiar from spiritualist writings, and she refuses to cross the Atlantic and return to England, at this point, instead opting for a life of uncertainty, itinerancy and independence in a new country.

In many ways the stories of Florence Marryat and Emma Hardinge Britten remind us that transatlantic travel was easier and more readily undertaken than is sometimes acknowledged. Spiritualism can be read as an enabling principle. Work on spiritualism has not drawn significant attention to this aspect of such narratives since it has concentrated on ideas of spiritualism within specific national contexts while also acknowledging (albeit tacitly) the shortcomings of such an approach by alluding to contacts and mobilities that characterise spiritualism. This is not to undermine some of the very good work that has been done on the subject, especially on issues of class and gender; rather, it is to suggest another focus. Historians have often concentrated upon crossing between various spheres of activity, but not of crossing from one culture to another. So, the spread of spiritualism is usually considered as an example of a form of reverse movement that challenged the predominant westward movement of people across the Atlantic by setting up a counter-movement of ideas and of culture crossing back over the ocean. Its huge popularity and spread was unprecedented, though around the same period other American cultural products were also having a massive influence on British society: the

gigantic success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) with both the British and American reading public (which Chapter 2 touches upon) is the most obvious example. Central to such arguments is the idea of crossing.

What particularly concerns me here are the many ways in which notions of crossing have been imagined: both by critics and historians of spiritualism, and by nineteenth-century spiritualists. The words 'crossing' or 'crossing over' may be read as peculiarly apt suggestions of the many modes of impersonations and performances, gender, racial and class transgressions that took place within the boundaries of the spiritualist seance. 'Crossing over' in one sense suggests at once not just a movement from (one?) place to another, but also a mode of transformation, assumed or simply possible, that might and often did take place within the arena of actions with which spiritualism is associated. 'Crossing over' suggests itself as a useful metaphor, as well as an actual description of a series of activities or acts. It signifies a challenge to divides of geography, class, race and gender, but it also suggests ways in which the self-descriptions and justifications spiritualists gave of themselves and their practices utilised discourses from religion, science and material culture. Spiritualists themselves literally crossed over between the language of these areas, just as science, spiritualists claimed, borrowed from the idioms of spiritualism. Writing in 1872, a spiritualist claimed that in private scientists 'adopt the idioms of Spiritualists, and unwittingly give expression to the fact that they entertain the same convictions as to the existence of spirits, their agency as mediums, and their communion with those in the flesh.'²⁹ Spiritualists created for themselves a complex discourse to account for the new realities they believed themselves to be experiencing. In this context, then, crossing over implies an ability to adapt and utilise, to make a new narrative from a series of disparate – often, I would argue, transatlantic – sources. In this way, spiritualism allowed for the crossing of boundaries in ways that were genuinely radical and enabling as several scholars, notably Ann Braude, have shown.³⁰ Yet, in addition to the suggestion of linguistic inventiveness, there are many other ways in which the terms might be read or considered. For the moment I want to think of 'crossing over' in a number of broad senses rather than in a narrow sense. I will conceive of it as a form of movement from one world to another and as from one side of the Atlantic to the other and back again – as criss-crossing, to put it another way. But I will also consider it as a mode of transformation of subjectivity that could and did take place through the complex nexus of suggestions and willed imaginings within the seance. If, in a seance, a young working-class white woman could 'become' a series of figures from

entirely different class or social backgrounds, even from another race or the opposite gender, or if she could be the centre of the enthralled attention of powerful people who otherwise would not consider her at all, this was a remarkable achievement. This was one of the ways in which it was highly attractive to practitioners. Given the possibility of the transformative acts, the literally world-changing or world-challenging performances of the sort that could and did take place, it can be imagined that the primary interest of many ordinary spiritualists was with the seance itself, the site of such activity. This, though, is not to say that they all had identical motives.

Once spiritualism crossed the ocean and 'arrived' in England, its extraordinary spread on this side of the Atlantic rivalled that even of its remarkable explosion in America, as the work of Owen, Oppenheim, Barrow and others have shown indisputably.³¹ Its spread within England sparked a good deal of anxiety amongst many observers who cast their anxiety not just as a fear about the unknown nature of the new religion, but specifically as one about a form of American cultural imperialism, and indeed contamination, which needed to be resisted. This strange new fad that had crossed the water might be acceptable over there, but what place did it have within religious, political and cultural traditions over here? Contemporary British commentators on American life such as Charles Dickens, Fanny Trollope and Captain Marryat had shown to the British public that in many respects the New World and the Old were indeed very different.³² Dickens argued, though, that with respect to religious practices there was less division between the two countries than might seem to be the case:

I do not find in America any one form of religion with which we in Europe, or even in England, are unacquainted. Dissenters resort thither in great numbers, as other people do, simply because it is a land of resort; and great settlements of them are founded, because ground can be purchased, and towns and villages reared, where there were none of the human creation before. But even the Shakers emigrated from England; our country is not unknown to Mr Joseph Smith, the apostle of Mormonism, or to his benighted disciples; I have beheld religious scenes myself in some of our populous towns which can hardly be surpassed by an American camp-meeting; and I am not aware that any instance of superstitious imposture on the one hand and superstitious credulity on the other, has had its origins in the United States, which we cannot more than parallel by the precedents of Mrs Southcote, Mary Tofts the rabbit-breeder, or even Mr Thom of Canterbury: which latter case arose some time after the dark ages had passed away.³³

This uneven catalogue of figures scarcely veils a contempt that had already been exposed explicitly in *American Notes* (1842) in his account of his visit to a Shaker community. This suggests that Dickens was not sufficiently interested in such a comparison to argue his case more thoroughly. Yet his claims have a use in explaining, if he is correct, a reason why spiritualism captured the imagination in nineteenth-century England and resisted co-option into nationalist discourses, instead appealing to readings that suggested it was beyond or outside of or even not in need of such categorisation. As Owen puts it, ‘Unconcerned by dire warnings that spiritualism was “an especially American plot” concocted by those who sought to “propagate their own religious and political views”, many were keen to give the spirits the benefit of the doubt’.³⁴ More pointedly, perhaps, many converts simply weren’t interested in such readings of the new phenomenon, finding in spiritualism rather a set of practices that they found congenial, comforting, exciting, unconventional, spectacular and ultimately available to them. In other words, British spiritualists themselves seem to have cared very little about whether modern spiritualism had come over from America, or what it implied even if had. For the whole point, to them, was surely that by its very nature spiritualism, predicated on notions of boundary crossing, rendered the notion of boundaries and of crossing more complex than such attacks implied. Faced with the ‘evidence’, as it was usually seen, that dead loved ones could communicate with the living even after crossing over, it therefore made no sense that only dead Americans could perform this feat. Though a great deal in the world of spirits closely resembled the world as the living knew it, national boundaries were certainly absent from descriptions of the spirit world.

That is not to say, however, that many American attempts to describe the world of spirits did not borrow heavily from Republican sentiment, political theory or rhetoric, as Bret Carroll has recently shown.³⁵ Andrew Jackson Davis published a new version of the Declaration of Independence in *The Spirit Messenger* in 1851, emphasising religious rather than political concerns and echoing the rethinking of America’s political project that was the concern of many American spiritualists.³⁶ Yet the dazzling array of historical figures from a number of different cultures that regularly appeared in seances on both sides of the Atlantic seemed to offer pluralist possibilities that overcame merely human and national boundaries. What this suggests, then, is that British spiritualists were embracing a cultural movement without expressing great anxiety about its origins or source. They were less interested in a defensive, conservative

reading of culture and more in embracing exciting newness. This account of cultural migration has significant implications, I believe, for the great wave of American cultural exportation that is characteristic of global culture today. The newness they embraced was, I think, a cultural form that was an amalgam of a set of collisions which took place within a new republic that had broken with Europe but still maintained close relations with it. In 1848, when the Fox sisters and their 'Rochester rappings' launched spiritualism on the world, this republic was still reliant on a system of slavery that allowed it to prosper economically; but alongside this had experienced encounters with indigenous peoples whose effect on American culture was more profound than Anglo-Americans were prepared to admit. Spiritualism, as a product of a unique set of historical and geographical conditions, needs to be read with the widest and most critical attention to these circumstances.

So, I return to the question I raised at the start of this chapter: does a transatlanticist reading bring something new to established readings of spiritualism?³⁷ Thinking about how spiritualism evolved, what its sources were and how it spread from one nation to another, and then further still, involves a reflection on how culture itself evolves and reproduce itself and what role capitalism has in such work. Reading transatlantically in its broadest sense may be a fruitful and rewarding exercise, as the rise in transatlantic and circumatlantic studies is proving. Such readings challenge previous paradigms and in this way have political implications not just about the ways in which we read and interpret culture, but also about how we organise ourselves institutionally and ideologically. This is something I welcome enthusiastically. More specifically, to turn back to the subject of this chapter, reading transatlantically allows for an examination of the phenomenon of spiritualism that promises to reveal exciting sets of transactions, interventions, collisions and meetings. In short, I think it does.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Howard Kerr, *Mediums, Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850–1900*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972; R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977; Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1997. I am greatly indebted to each of these works.
- 2 In the work of Alex Owen, Logie Barrow and others it is the culturally specific that forms the primary focus. See Logie Barrow *Independent Spirits*:

- Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850–1910*, London and New York, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986; Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, London, Virago, 1989.
- 3 Barrow, *Independent Spirits*, p. 10.
 - 4 This is work in progress.
 - 5 Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, and Betrayals*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 13.
 - 6 For example, in her autobiography Emma Hardinge Britten mentions meeting ‘many excellent [black] mediums’ on a visit to the southern states in 1859–60 (Margaret Wilkinson (ed.), *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten*, Manchester and London, John Heywood, 1900, pp. 146–6).
 - 7 Spear’s comment is cited in Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, p. 69. For further arguments about the significance of the telegraph see, for example, Emma Hardinge [Britten], *Modern American Spiritualism*, New York, 1872.
 - 8 She had told her mother that she had outgrown her disability while in spirit life and would never again appear with such a distinctive characteristic. Florence Marryat, *There is no Death*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1891, p. 115.
 - 9 Marryat, *There is no Death*, p. 192.
 - 10 Marryat, *There is no Death*, pp. 291–2.
 - 11 Marryat, *There is no Death*, p. 293.
 - 12 Marryat, *There is no Death*, pp. 5–6.
 - 13 See, for instance, Marryat, *There is no Death*, pp. 18–19; pp. 224–49.
 - 14 Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.
 - 15 Her profound interest in spiritualism has been amply documented.
 - 16 Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 19, letter from Mary Howitt to her husband.
 - 17 Oppenheim writes that ‘As spiritualism steadily moved westwards across the United States, expansion to the east, across the ocean, was only a matter of time. There was a virgin audience in Britain, primed by news of the American phenomena, and ready to be impressed’ (*The Other World*, p. 11).
 - 18 For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote to her husband of having had meetings with a Mrs E. of Boston while in Florence in 1860 that were of great comfort to her. Though Mrs E. was anxious about calling herself a spiritualist, Beecher Stowe was sure that she was a ‘very powerful medium’ and encouraged her to ‘try the spirits whether they were of God – to keep close to the Bible and prayer, and then accept whatever came’. Annie Fields (ed.) *The Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, Cambridge, Boston, The Riverside Press, and New York, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898, p. 253. Letter to Calvin Stowe, 16 January 1860. A fair amount of work has been done on groups of spiritualists (especially expatriate groups of spiritualists) outside Britain and the United States.

- 19 Wilkinson (ed.), *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten*, pp. 22–3. For accounts of predictions of Atlantic shipping disasters see pp. 31–4.
- 20 Wilkinson (ed.), *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten*, pp. 22–3.
- 21 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London, New York, Verso, 1995, p. 4, and see indexed references.
- 22 Anonymous, *A Reply to Captain Marryat's Illiberal and Incorrect Statements Relative to the Coloured West Indies, as Published in his Work, Entitled, 'A Diary in America'*, London, E. Justins & Sons, 1840.
- 23 See Anonymous, *A Reply to Captain Marryat*, p. 3. The claim is made by a figure signed 'A Coloured West Indian'. For details of Frederick Marryat's life see David Hannay, *Life of Frederick Marryat*, London, Walter Scott, New York and Toronto, W.G. Gage and Co., 1889, and Florence Marryat, *Life and Letters of Captain Marryat* (2 volumes), London, Richard Bentley and Son, 1872. The question of his ancestry is raised in highly coded ways, chiefly through the notion that biographers of Marryat would do well to avoid making unproven assumptions. See, for example, *The Athenaeum*, 3212 (18 May 1889), p. 633. Four notes in *Notes and Queries* deal with the issue of which street in Westminster Marryat was born. The attention to this detail and deference to family authority on the subject is not particularly unusual. Yet given the claims made in Grenada it does suggest that there was still a question hanging over Marryat's ancestry. See *Notes and Queries*, 7th series, 7 (1889), pp. 9, 74, 177, 294.
- 24 This vision (which I am writing about elsewhere – work in progress) is peopled by Native American spirits who roam England destroying buildings, especially churches, and calling themselves 'the soldiers of the new Reformation'. Wilkinson (ed.), *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten*, pp. 210–12.
- 25 See Robert S. Tilton, *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994; Alden T. Vaughan, 'Trinculo's Indian: American Natives in Shakespeare's England', in Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman (eds), *'The Tempest' and its Travels*, London, Reaktion Books, 2000, pp. 49–59; Karen Robertson, 'Pocahontas at the Masque', *Signs* (Spring 1996), 551–83. A number of mediums had American Indian spirit guides, as Alex Owen and others have noted.
- 26 Wilkinson (ed.), *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten*, pp. 37–8.
- 27 Wilkinson (ed.), *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten*, p. 38.
- 28 Wilkinson (ed.), *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten*, p. 38.
- 29 Cited in Cottom, *Abyss of Reason*, p. 35.
- 30 See Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1989.
- 31 See, for example, Owen, *The Darkened Room*; Oppenheim, *The Other World*; Barrow, *Independent Spirits*.
- 32 Dickens's *American Notes for General Circulation* was published in 1842,

- Fanny Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* in 1832, and Captain Marryat's *A Diary in America* in 1842.
- 33 Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation*, eds Arnold Goldman and John Whitley, London, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 290.
- 34 Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 19.
- 35 Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*.
- 36 See, especially, Chapter Three: 'Spiritualist Republicanism'.
- 37 One work that has been especially important to me while thinking about this subject is Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996.

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