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Matter’s “Dark” Powers: Performing Objects and Racialization in 19th-Century American Spiritualism

By Hazel Rickard

Abstract: 19th-century American spiritualists claimed that spirits revealed their presence through “physical manifestations”: table-tipping, animated objects, and spirit “materializations.” Significantly, spirit mediums, who were mostly young white women, credited Black spirits with producing the most powerful manifestations because these spirits were thought to possess a strong connection with matter. I ask: How did spiritualist material performance engage with 19th-century conceptions of matter? And what were the consequences for American understandings of race?

Significantly, the height of the spiritualist movement spanned the Civil War, Emancipation, the Indian Wars, and the women’s suffrage movement. Persons frequently treated as objects or resources were engaged in struggles for self-possession and sovereignty. Conversely, technological innovations including electricity and the telegraph made the substrate of production increasingly immaterial, and commodity culture elevated objects to appear transcendent. In this context, Black and Indigenous people were considered sacrifices to modernity, inhabitants of a material world from which a white American spirit was formed.

Looking at the performances of Mary Schindler, Elizabeth Denton, Anne Denton Cridge, and Mary Comstock, I show how spirit mediums attempted to rarify matter to let spirits manifest. I suggest that spiritualist material performance reveals a racial metaphysics that has taken up residence in American culture as a fascination with performing objects. Ultimately, I contend that spiritualist material performances were significant in the invention of American whiteness—whiteness as an occult sphere characterized by gestures to test its boundary by engaging with matter. I attempt to contribute to contemporary debates concerning racialization and puppetry by suggesting that racial alterity can be represented, not only through identity content, but through the form of an object’s awakening—transcendent white actors struggling to know and tame Black objects.

Keywords: representation, race and ethnicity, Channeling (Spiritualism)—History—19th century, matter—philosophy
Soon after the murder of George Floyd, a white spirit medium named Carol Ann Collins claimed to have channeled Floyd’s spirit, delivering this message to protesters in Minneapolis via Twitter: “civil liberties are not what we need to be fighting for, be the one who says I love you to all.” There was such an outpouring of anger on social media in response to her message that Collins deleted her Twitter account and took her website down, taking no responsibility for her statement. What inspired this act: a white woman claiming a Black spirit as her own, as a pacifist martyr in support of the status quo that is deadly for Black people?

In this paper, I want to propose that this phenomenon has a performance history that naturalized what I think of as a racial metaphysics. Consider the spirit medium Fanny Conant channeling Black spirits in 1860 to deliver the message, “slavery is both right and proper…. Many thousands find a gate to heaven through the system of slavery” (1860, 6). White mediums in the 19th century silenced the voices of actual Black people by creating a figure of a passive Black Other, a figure that was objectified in more ways than one—framed as a symbol of darkness and death, but also, significantly for the interests of this collection, approached as a representation of matter itself. One of Conant’s spirits explained: Black spirits “produce the most wonderful physical manifestations” (animating objects, that is) because they “are more material than you” (the white audience) (1861, 6). Understanding how this racial metaphysics was enacted in the 19th century, I suggest, may help puppet scholars think about how alterity can be represented in performance, not just through character identities, but as structural forces: spirit and matter.

One Minneapolis puppeteer asked me in the wake of the city’s racial reckoning: Is my puppet show offensively white? I think it depends on representation of difference on stage: who gets to be human, and who othered, and also how one understands different objects coming to life—through transcendence or immanence. I approach the question of whiteness and performing objects through occult history because I believe a certain spiritualist materialism, which became predominant in the 19th century, has taken up residence in American culture as a fascination with objects. This is a paper about how Blackness has been framed as a material Other to white transcendent spirit, and as such, it attends to the mythic space created by narratives and performances within white culture.

**Background: White Mediumship**

First, I provide some background on American Spiritualism: how it produced a kind of mediumship that I believe is best understood through the lens of material performance. According
to spiritualists, Kate and Maggie Fox (aged 11 and 14) invented the “spiritual telegraph” in 1848 in Hydesville, New York, by prompting spirits to knock on wooden tables. As a result, furniture reportedly tipped and danced in their presence at all hours. Many young women became mediums in the following decades, and, by 1870, spiritualists numbered in the millions across the nation. While there were a few prominent Black spiritualists who were well-known trance speakers, the movement was overwhelmingly white, as were the mediums who produced physical manifestations. Furthermore, spiritualists self-consciously contributed to white culture by claiming to practice a “modern” form of mediumship, differentiating themselves from Indigenous and Black spiritual practices, even as they appropriated images and language that they attributed to these groups. It is significant that the rise and fall of the movement spanned the Civil War and the Indian Wars. As recent scholarship has shown, spiritualists frequently debated the meaning of Darwinist evolution, racism, slavery, and Indian genocide with spirits (Troy 2017; Cox 2003; Castronovo 2001). And when their séances did not focus explicitly on these issues, they displayed an implicit racial metaphysics. Susan Gilman (2003) has aptly called racism in America a “racial occult” sphere because the Black/white binary holds such moral and spiritual meanings. I intend to show that this phenomenon was not just metaphorical but literal and embodied. In spiritualist performances, discourses of race were grounded in occult rituals: Mediums attempted to spiritualize matter, which they frequently enacted through touch or disembodied animation.

**Crystallized in Stone: Blackness and the Material Past**

In the 19th-century United States, matter was generally understood to be inert, but spiritualists attempted to activate matter to reveal presence of spirit, as in psychometry, the act of touching a stone or object to receive a vision of the past. Here is a description of what the spirit medium Elizabeth Denton saw upon touching a fossil in 1863:

I see a head; the lower part of the forehead is very prominent, so that the eyes seem deeply set. The forehead is very low, and round and receding. The face has an awful look; it is dark, and feathers are stuck round the neck… Now I see the chest and arms. It seems hardly human; yet it is not savage and wild, for I have no such sensation in connection with it… He is looking off. In front of him is a cave. It is sad to see such a pitiful object in the shape of a human being. (204)

Elizabeth’s husband William was a prominent geologist and the two of them built a following for reading what they called “the souls of things.” Curiously, as Elizabeth looked into the deep past through fragments of stone and fossil, she saw images of a prehistoric world populated by dark-skinned humanoids.
Similarly, William’s sister, Anne Denton Cridge, carried out investigations with the Dentons in 1873 and reportedly came across a meteor that gave her a glimpse of Mars and “a race of men who are almost black, their bodies nearly covered with dark hair… the most inferior race of human beings” (219). Rocks became surfaces of appearance for images of the not-quite-human, appearing from what Sylvia Wynter (1979) has called “a Void,” a phantasmal dark space defined by Lack—not being human or white made the territory of Blackness endlessly flexible within white imaginaries. Significantly, in Denton’s description, she switches back and forth between using the pronouns “it” and “he,” and her final reflection reminds us that discourses of racial Otherness have been inextricably intertwined with issues of objecthood. Her comment that it is “sad to see such a pitiful object in the shape of a human being” speaks to Franz Fanon’s (2008) awareness of being treated as “an object among other objects” (48), and George Lamming’s (1992) description of the enslaved as “man-shaped ploughs” (121).

Spiritualists attempted to rarify matter by imbuing it with spirit, and in the process they exposed racial assumptions hiding within the duality of matter/spirit. The object, in this case, the fossil, became the doorway into the gap between them. In the Denton–Cridge visions, Blackness became the image of both the distant human past and aliens in outer space. This is one example of how spirit mediums made whiteness into an occult practice and Blackness into an endlessly flexible material/spiritual resource. There were many approaches to the problem of materiality/immateriality within spiritualist materialism, and I hope to show how each one tested the boundary that disconnected white people from racial Others.

Mary Schindler’s Minstrel Show

In the 1870s, the medium Mary Schindler invited a Black spirit into white domestic spaces through the frame of a minstrel show, displaying the supposed connection between Blackness and objects through unruly bodily movement. Schindler first mentions this spirit while describing a séance at her home in Texas, where she used a planchette (the origin of the Ouija board). The wooden pointer danced on its two bottom corners, “cutting up” in imitation of a minstrel dance. Then the spirit signed his name, Oliver, and asked if the ladies would pray to the man (God) to bring Black folks out of the “dark place” called Hell, a place where, he explained, there are no white people (1877, 104–7). This depiction of the segregated afterlife mirrors images from other mediums such as Andrew Jackson Davis and Jonathan Koons. The reason that mediums gave for placing Black spirits in Hell, as Fanny Conant argued, was that non-white spirits were more
material than transcendent white ones. While physical mediumship in séances always centered performing objects like the tipping table or planchette, white spirits used objects like instruments while Black spirits became the objects. The wooden piece stood in for Oliver’s body, and erratic and forceful movements of the planchette were his trademark. On one occasion, the object “began to caper violently,” and the medium chastised him. Oliver reportedly protested by arguing that he needed the exercise, making the connection between the spirit-body and the object explicit. Schindler felt the need to control or tame these wild antics because the performances made her white audience anxious. Russ Castronovo (2001) has shown that white mediums framed Black spirits as burdens on white minds, and, I would add, burdens on the white body. As one of Schindler’s spirits explained, “the dark spirits exhaust the medium,” so she needs to rest and recharge her magnetism in between visits (Schindler 1877, 104). The white woman served the purpose of a battery, a means of performance without performing herself. Paradoxically, the invisible Black actor bore the burden of having a body while the living white woman practiced disembodiment. One might ask: What inspired her to seek such a collaboration with a Black spirit if he was such a sign of disruption in her otherwise orderly séances?

The presence of the Black spirit posed a test to whiteness, I suggest, by pushing racial boundaries, and this was desirable because this test helped her combine spirit with matter (coded as white and Black), but it also produced social tension. In one of his visits, Oliver spoke of his master, who was there in “the dark place” with him, and whose skin had reportedly become Black (1877, 110). The idea that racial difference is not eternal produced conflict between Oliver and the medium. In one séance, he was the first spirit to arrive and she scolded “Oh, Oliver, you oughtn’t to get before the white folks!” to which Oliver responded: “Missis, mam, de white folks aint no whiter dan Oliver in de spirit-world. I’m as good as any body. De one dat comes first, talks first. (Here planchette went rapidly all over the table, but did not write for some time)” (110). This final dance and the refusal to write amplified the gap between the medium and spirit. Schindler reinforced the boundary between whiteness and Blackness with her words, but her interest in demonstrating animated matter left her open to its blending. The planchette’s dance was reportedly unintelligible and overwhelming to her, not a specific mark of Otherness, but a gesture rising up from the alien territory of matter.

Sylvia Wynter (1979) writes of the importance of the minstrel show in constructing white identity, arguing that the Sambo character signifies a return to nature, a figure of longing for white
people who were anxious about the mechanization of life under modernity. But this “nature” is not quite human and represents terror at the same time: “The black exists as the Symbolic Object constituting the Lack, the Void of these qualities that have been postulated as the absolute sign of the certainty of being human. That a man or almost a man can exist, lacking these things, sets into play the terror that these attributes can be lost” (152). Mary Schindler played out the mythic relationship between whiteness and Blackness with performing objects because the object could be like an anchor in a chasm between spirit and matter, whiteness and Blackness, making something alien familiar. Oliver, the Sambo figure dancing as an object, pushed against the contradictory terms of whiteness: the tendency to claim a universal humanity while actively excluding the Black Other. The question that Schindler began every encounter with—“Oliver, is that you?”—brings up doubt as the frame of the performance: Whose spirit, whose dead, are we speaking to? In a sense, Schindler recognized Oliver as separate from her, but she made him her own through the laughter and intimacy of a minstrel puppet show. Spiritualism was about the thrill of encountering the mysterious “other side” through an object, and whether or not white mediums dealt directly with the racial contradictions involved (how racial Otherness overlapped with death and materiality, for instance), the implicit racial frame kept them rehearsing a racial metaphysics that was essentially designed to capture or tame Blackness within a familiar object. Like the stones of the Denton—Cridge Visions, Schindler attempted to look through the object, separated enough from the Black spirit to retreat back into the world of assumed white humanity.

**White Unconsciousness in Confronting the Real Black Other**

Significantly, white mediums performed ambivalently or unconsciously in order to display the contradictory racial attraction/repulsion at the heart of spiritualism. In 1856, an adolescent girl named Mary Comstock, staying with a prominent spiritualist family in Rochester, New York, confronted Frederick Douglass with an image supposedly drawn by spirits on her arm. As the medium Emma Hardinge Britten (1870) reported:

> On examining the young woman’s arm, Mrs. Burtis discovered that the red lines corruscated upon it had formed into a distinct and beautifully represented picture of a kneeling man, with a woolly head and African cast of features, a chain round his waist terminating in two balls, which were ingeniously fitted into the veins at the bend of the arm, whilst above the whole was written in fine characters the words, “A POOR OLD SLAVE.” Perhaps a stranger scene could hardly be imagined than that quiet garden arbor presented. The immobile aspect of the medium, gazing indifferently at the mystery wrought in her own organization; the dark-hued stranger regarding with obviously intense emotion this touching memento of the beloved and martyred dead. (196–97)
The image would have been seen in reference to the Wedgewood seal that had become an icon for the abolitionist movement, an illustration of a slave kneeling to pray and the words “Am I not a man and a brother?” Here, however, the words do not speak to a common humanity, but rather frame slavery as a pitiful state, like Denton’s image of an object in the shape of a man, or even a desirable, fixed state like Conant’s depiction of slavery as the doorway to heaven. Comstock was reportedly illiterate and had no understanding of the image’s significance or of Douglass’s identity, and this was taken as proof that she could not be producing the image herself. She even began the encounter by pointing at Douglass and using a racial slur. This behavior, while thoroughly naturalized by the culture of anti-Black racism in the United States, was also employed to strengthen the irresponsibility of the medium for spirit communication. White feminized passivity, most spiritualists agreed, was the necessary condition for mediumship. If a medium stood too far behind the words they communicated, one could argue that the medium was likely the author. This created a situation in which mediums espoused contradictory thoughts about race, either from an ignorant or supposedly unconscious state. It seems significant that spiritualist sources do not cite Douglass’s response. The unconscious, sympathetic displays of white mediums, I can only imagine, were difficult to respond to, being such anxious performances of whiteness entreating Black Others for acknowledgement.

**Conclusion**

Rather than seeing whiteness as a fixed or transcendent identity, I see it as an occult sphere characterized by contradictory gestures to test its boundary. The texts that I have cited here are offensive fantasies of Blackness, and I wonder whether it is worth bringing them back into the world through this research. I do so, as a white scholar and artist, in the hope that white people may recognize how this racial metaphysics may be carried out in contemporary performance practices and attempt to act otherwise. What does it mean, for instance, for a white puppeteer to control a Black puppet? As one commenter on Twitter asked of Carol Ann Collins’ performance: Could it be spiritual blackface? I am attempting to contribute to contemporary debates about whiteness, in which, for example, Linda Martin Alcoff (2015) argues that white people must find a way to accept their own specific white identities. The question is how to acknowledge the social reality of whiteness while de-investing in it. Because whiteness has a history of being a transcendent category, I see the challenge in bringing whiteness back to the ground, not letting it be the unmarked human category or an unspoken escape route from responsibility. If we approach the
problem of whiteness by looking at theatrical objects in historical context, we can show how mythic whiteness was constructed and how it often rides unseen in performance. I am struck by the fact that two adolescent white girls and tipping tables could steal the attention of Americans in 1848, amid great violence and upheaval in the country, making millions of people question what constitutes matter and spirit through something that looked, from my perspective, like a disembodied puppet show.
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About the Author

Hazel Rickard is a recent graduate from the University of Minnesota with a PhD in Theatre Historiography. She received her MA from Washington University in St. Louis in Theatre and Performance studies. Her research interests include puppetry, spiritualism, witchcraft and the occult, critical race, gender, and sexuality studies.