

**PERFORMING ON AND IN THE BORDERLANDS:
EMBODIMENT, AUTHORITY, AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN
SCIENTIST AND SPIRITUALIST CONFRONTATIONS**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the performances of Spiritualist Mediums and the scientists who sought to debunk them during the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries in Britain and North America. I use archival sources and performance analysis in order to craft a transhistorical study that deconstructs the power dynamics of spiritual performance, knowledge production, and scientific authority. Specifically, I focus on the embodied Spiritualist performances of the Medium Kathleen Goligher, who expelled ectoplasm – believed to be the physical matter of spirits – out of her vagina. Locating these performances in this specific site of the body allows me to analyse the ways in which various signifiers of femininity and antitheatrical discourse aimed at women came to bear on interpretations of Mediums that cast them as frauds. I compare this against the figure of the “man of science,” and the ways in which the professionalization of science in the latter half of the nineteenth century conflated attributes such as objectivity, disinterestedness, and reason with masculinity. I argue that out of this powerful site of authority emerges the figure of the scientist debunker. By analysing what I call “debunker discourse” I show that contrary to patriarchal cultural narratives that cast men as inherently trustworthy and unaffected, these scientific debunkers engaged in highly theatrical performative practices – and in some cases carried on as what some might call *drama queens*. I then reframe Spiritualist and debunker performances by placing them in conversation with the politics and aesthetics of twentieth-century feminist vaginal performance art. In doing so, I expand previously articulated genealogies of body art, and make an argument for the debunker-as-critic – figures who, I argue, use debunker rhetorical strategies in their attempts to discredit, regulate, and shut-down these

performances. Throughout the dissertation I use the interstitial spaces between chapters to build on and extend the work of Gloria Anzaldúa by developing a poetic theory of the Borderlands, a liminal space that exists between the binaries of science/Spiritualism, male/female, life/death, and performance/life (to name but a few). I argue that it is in their very in-betweenness that the Borderlands hold generative potential – for art, theory, and other modes of political expression. The discomfort and destabilization provided by the Borderlands is generative in its ability to draw attention to, and critique, the problematic and divisive foundations upon which such binaries are constructed, and provide a space from which different futures can be imagined.

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We embrace our genitals as part, not separate, from our spirits... We utilize sexually explicit words, pictures and performances to communicate our ideas and emotions.

– excerpt from the *Post-Porn Modernist Manifesto*,
also quoted in Republican congressman Rep. Dana
Rohrabacher’s February 5, 1990 “Dear Colleague”
letter to the 435 members of the U.S. House of
Representatives.

Header image (pussy-as-proscenium) adapted from the “Post-Porn Modernist Manifesto,” handout 1989.

Introduction

Every performance begins with the setting of the stage. In this drama my players are a varied cast, drawn from diverse areas and time periods: a turn-of-the-twentieth century Spiritualist Medium from Belfast, the great Victorian “men of science,” a dedicated (or perhaps credulous) psychological researcher, explicit body feminist performance artists, art critics, and Republican lawmakers. This disparate-seeming crew play against a series of different backdrops and screens: millennia-old biases towards theatricality, patriarchal cultures that fear and attempt to regulate female sexuality, and a modern science that is based on causes observable in nature with no recourse to the supernatural. What results is a transhistorical study where these themes and characters emerge to tell a story of the complex dynamics between Spiritualist performers and scientist debunkers who sought to discredit them.

Science and Spiritualism are two seemingly distinct practices that are often framed antagonistically.¹ Since the Enlightenment, science has attempted to uncover objective truths about the natural world through empirical observation and research. Practitioners of Spiritualism, on the other hand, believed they could establish communication with the dead through the ritual of *séance*. However, a deeper exploration of the two reveals that they share a number of similarities: both can be read as performance, and both are concerned with uncovering or proving certain truths – whether they be about the natural laws that govern the universe, or proof of the human soul and its ability to be contacted beyond the grave. What specifically binds the performance of science² to the performance of Spiritualism in this dissertation is the use of the body and

the presentation of the individual who possesses knowledge and access to the hidden realm.

Spiritualism was both a widely popular religious movement and entertainment fad that started in 1849 with two teenage sisters in Hydesville, NY.³ Margaret and Katherine Fox – the “Fox Sisters” as they were widely known – became worldwide sensations for the “rapping” noises they could apparently summon and use to communicate with spirits. Over the following decades Spiritualism would become a widespread cultural trend, extending across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Europe (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Spiritualist meeting in Leipzig, Germany, 1893 (artist unknown). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Beyond the entertainment value of parlour-room séance circles, Spiritualism became a serious religious movement.⁴ One of the core tenants of the faith was that certain people held the ability to act as Mediums – intermediaries between the spirit world and the living, who could convey messages across the threshold of life and death. Spirits communicated in multiple ways, including directly through Mediums in trance-like

states, through automatic writing (where a Medium would write without conscious control and the messages were attributed to the spirits they were channelling), and via rapping sounds (like the Fox sisters), a type of spirit Morse code that could be used to spell out communications. Spirits also variously performed physical feats such as levitating tables (a common object around which the séance circle would form), playing musical instruments, and manifesting as wet, slimy physical material known as ectoplasm.

With its growing popularity, Spiritualism also attracted the serious interest of scientists in the nineteenth century. In 1882, the Society for Psychical research was founded in Britain as “the first organization to conduct scholarly research into human experiences that challenge contemporary scientific models” (spr.ac.uk). Many prominent scientists, including chemist and physicist Sir William Crookes (1832-1919) and physicist Sir Oliver Lodge (1851-1940), wanted to (and did) believe. They devised experiments to learn more about Spiritualism and attempted to link it to scientific discoveries of the time. There were also many scientists who were skeptical of Spiritualism. This found particular relevance in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when science was increasingly understood as something outside of, and in many cases opposed to, religion. From this sprang the debunkers – investigators (not all scientists – almost all male) whose stated mission was to expose fraudulent Mediums. The conflicts between Spiritualist believers and debunkers – which have been explored by scholars such as Ann Braude (*Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 1989), Alex Owen (*The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, 1989), David J. Hess (*Science in the New Age:*

The Paranormal, Its Defenders and Debunkers, and American Culture, 1993), and Richard A. Noakes (*Physics and Psychics: The Occult and the Sciences in Modern Britain*, 2019) – had complex dynamics and implications. At the heart of these issues were the profoundly human experiences of grief, pleasure, deception, and power.

Into these complex dynamics I insert my players. After laying a theoretical foundation that interrogates how throughout history women have been particularly subject to an antitheatrical bias associated with mimicry and deceit, yet simultaneously associated with the quality of “feminine intuition,” I call my first major character to the stage. John Tyndall (1820-1893) was a famed nineteenth century physicist who, as a member of the Scientific Naturalists, was an instrumental part in the formation of the new professional role of “scientist.” I use Tyndall as an entry point to discussing scientific performance, and in particular the performance of masculinity, and to define the role of the scientist debunker. Following this examination of Tyndall, I analyse the performances of Kathleen Goligher (1898-1972), a young Spiritualist from Belfast who became known for producing ectoplasm out of her vagina, and William Jackson Crawford (1880-1920), a lecturer in mechanical engineering who both championed Goligher’s abilities through his research with her, and was the subject of withering debunker attacks. Finally, I extend my performance analysis of Kathleen Goligher by placing her in dialogue with two feminist performance artists, Carolee Schneemann (1939-2019) and Annie Sprinkle (b. 1954) who also used their vaginal space in performances, and withstood similar attacks from critics and lawmakers intent on discrediting them and their art.

Holes are a recurring motif and metaphor in this dissertation; holes in research, holes in bodies, holes in an understanding of female/AFAB (assigned female at birth)

sexuality and pleasure, emotional holes in the heart affected by grief, and holes in human knowledge regarding what happens after death. Into these gaps I insert my analysis with the goal of providing a more complicated, if not entirely (w)hole, understanding of the dynamics of these performances and the various social and historical factors that have shaped them.

Exigency/Holes

The history of Spiritualism has been written about extensively, with particular attention paid to women's roles as Mediums. Scholars such as Ann Braude and Alex Owen have looked at the important roles that women Spiritualists played in the United States, and Britain respectively.⁵ In her book *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (1989), Braude writes about the intersection of Spiritualism and women's rights and argues that female Mediums should be taken seriously as religious leaders in their own right. Similarly, in Owen's *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1989) she argues that Spiritualism presented a unique site and celebration of female spiritual authority. Historians of science (notably, Evelleen Richards, Carolyn Merchant, Evelyn Fox-Keller, Cynthia Eagle Russett, Ornella Moscucci, and Londa L. Schiebinger) have also examined how gender has had an important role in shaping the discipline.⁶ What has received considerably less attention are the dynamics between Spiritualist performers and scientist debunkers. Spiritualist explicit body performances (a term that I borrow from Performance Studies scholar Rebecca Schneider – and expand upon below – that I am using to describe the act whereby Mediums produced spirit matter out of their vaginas)

are sometimes briefly referred to in the literature on Spiritualism, but have received very little dedicated scholarly attention. Likewise, Kathleen Goligher's Spiritualist performances have not been the subject of serious research since the original Crawford/debunker texts of the nineteen-teens and twenties. Where Goligher is mentioned briefly, as in Mary Roach's *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife* (2005), it is in tittering, mocking tones consistent with the debunker position.⁷ Thus, there is a significant gap in the scholarship on this fascinating embodied element of Spiritualism.

Similarly, though debunker rhetoric is oft reproduced in discussions of Spiritualism, there have been few sustained attempts to define and analyze debunker positions themselves. In his 1993 book *Science in the New Age: The Paranormal, Its Defenders & Debunkers* cultural anthropologist and science and technology studies scholar David J. Hess provides a detailed account of skeptics. He frames skeptics (what I refer to as debunkers) as existing on one side of a spectrum with parapsychologists and "New Agers" and makes the argument that, "although each community represents itself as fundamentally different from its Others, they all construct their differences in similar ways" (43) by practising "boundary work" (17) whereby each group puts up metaphorical walls in order to create and defend their discursive boundaries. Hess writes that, "each community sees its own position as the 'rational' one, and it reads the other as motivated by materialistic philosophy or material gain" (63). In the years since the publication of Hess' book there has not, to my knowledge, been any further scholarship analyzing debunkers. Using a Performance Studies lens I extend Hess' work on skeptics/debunkers with regard to scientific performance and the rhetorical positions scientists (and others) take when engaging with, or rather attempting to undermine, the supernatural.

Spiritualism has been analyzed in relation to theatre and performance, as in Sue- Ellen Case's *Performing Science and the Virtual* (2007), Amy Lehman's *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance* (2009), Anita Hammer's *Between Play and Prayer: The Variety of Theatricals in Spiritual Performance* (2010), Edmund B. Ligan's *The Theatre of the Occult Revival: Alternative Spiritual Performance from 1875 to the Present* (2014), Simone Natale's *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (2016), and Hazel Rickard's "Spiritualist Material Performance, Whiteness, and the Animist Other" (2023). Curators and art historians such as Jennifer Fisher (in her 2006 anthology *Technologies of Intuition*) and Serena Keshavjee (in her 2023 anthology *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs*) have similarly analyzed visual artists who take up Spiritualism in their work. Fisher links Spiritualism to performance art⁸ by the inclusion of performance artists in her edited volume, but stops short of making an explicit connection between nineteenth century Spiritualists and twentieth-century performance art beyond their shared use of intuition. While it may appear that I am "splitting hairs" in my distinguishing between theatrical vs. performance art analyses (and indeed one of the performances I analyze, Annie Sprinkle's *Post Post Modernist* has been described as theatre), the medium of performance art is important because key differences in context, form, relation to audience, and historical lineage affect the interpretation of such performances. For example, the centring of the artists' body as medium is closely aligned with performance art, making it a useful frame of reference for thinking about Spiritualist performance, especially the embodied vaginal performances I write about in this dissertation.

Research Questions

In order to fill in these gaps in the research I frame this dissertation around the following research questions. First, because my project is so connected to the body, and in particular women's embodiment, I start with questions that link antitheatrical discourse to anatomy. If one of the dynamics underlying Spiritualist/scientist discord is the assumption of fraud, I am interested in how long-held conceptions about women's bodies play into that. How is the suspect nature of performance—the association of mimicry with inauthenticity, artifice, deceit, and so on—expressed in the belief that women are naturally dissemblers? And how is the body, and female anatomy in particular, connected to this fear and distrust? To complicate this, Spiritualist Mediums were viewed alternatively as both charlatans and as having embodied connections to specialised realms – able to connect the living and the dead. How then, is there a tension or contradiction between the configuration of women as dissemblers and the simultaneous widely held belief that women are particularly attuned, or have unique access to intuition (which I expand upon in Chapter 1)? Furthermore, because these culturally held beliefs are rooted in essentialism, how can a consideration of these issues extend beyond cisgendered women's experiences to apply to transgendered bodies? How have trans bodies also been configured as untrustworthy in both medical and popular discourse?

If patriarchal mythmaking holds that women are overly emotional creatures whose bodies are something to be feared and distrusted, this is justified by the insistence that men are detached, logical, and worthy of trust and respect. I am interested in how these cultural narratives came to be particularly emblematic of and associated with the so-called great men of science. Here I build on the recent work of feminist historians and

Performance Studies scholars such as Marlis Schweitzer’s “Casting Clara Fisher: Phrenology, Protean Farce, and the ‘Astonishing’ Career of a Child Actress” (2016) and “*Lecture on Heads and Lectures with Skulls – Performance Transmutations*” (2022), Jenn Cole’s *Hysteria in Performance* (2021), and Roberta Barker’s *Symptoms of the Self: Tuberculosis and the Making of the Modern Stage* (2023). In pursuit of this I ask, how, beginning with the professionalization of science in the latter half of the nineteenth century, did scientists perform their knowledge and authority? How was this linked to a particular kind of masculinity? It is my contention that from this position of authority and expertise emerges the figure of scientist-debunker, who is central to anti-Spiritualist conflict. Therefore an important research question is how am I defining what I term “debunker discourse”? What are the characteristics, motivations, and goals of this rhetorical position as expressed in writing and lecturing? Furthermore, how can the role of scientist-debunker be understood as a type of performance? Returning to the patriarchal distinctions between women (dramatic, untrustworthy, not in control of their own emotions), and men (restrained, authoritative), how are these distinctions complicated by debunker performance? In other words, how did late nineteenth century and early twentieth century scientist debunkers engage in performative practices and theatrical spectacle that runs contrary to the image of the scientist as an objective, disinterested observer?

I put a sharper point on my work surrounding women-as-dissemblers by asking, how does embodied Spiritualist performance encapsulate the patriarchal fear and distrust of the female body? How did specific Spiritualist performers perhaps use this to their advantage when staging ectoplasmic performances where the vagina served as “off stage”

space? And how did a lack of understanding or unwillingness to discuss female anatomy manifest in scientific texts and contribute to both experimenter and debunker engagement with the performances? Despite a tendency on behalf of male observers to downplay any discussion of sexual anatomy, what does a reading of these performances through the lens of sexuality open up, so to speak?

Another major objective of my project is to place the specific Spiritualist performances of Kathleen Goligher in dialogue with the aesthetics and politics of feminist explicit body performance art, and link them to particular performance art pieces (Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* [1975/79] and Sprinkle's *Post-Porn Modernist* [1989-1996]). In my use of the term "explicit body" I gesture to Performance Studies scholar Rebecca Schneider, who theorized the expression in her 1997 book *The Explicit Body in Performance*. Schneider writes, "I have coined the phrase 'explicit body' as a means of addressing the ways [feminist performance art] aims to explicate bodies in social relation" (2). Recurrent themes of explicit body performance that Schneider teases out in her book include: the way such work "replays, across the body of the artist as stage, the historical drama of gender and race," how explicit body performance artists, "critically engage ways of seeing, specifically perspectivalism, which has inscribed women as given to be seen but not as given to see," how multiple layers of signification (gender, race, class) placed upon these artists body, "expose their link with representational structures of desire in commodity capitalism," and how explicit body performance artists, "[raise] questions about modernist 'shock value' and the particular fascination with a 'primitive,' sexual, and excremental body" (3). An important element of Schneider's theory is the dual meanings of the word explicit, explaining, "the words 'explicit' and 'explicate' stem

from the Latin *explicare*, which means ‘to unfold’” (3). Schneider therefore theorizes explicit body performances as being capable of making explicit, through the use of the sexually explicit body, multiple layers of signification that are prescribed to those bodies in social relation. Amelia Jones has also contributed much on feminist artists’ use of their bodies in performance, most notably in her 1998 book *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. One of the things Jones makes explicit in her book’s argument that is important to this dissertation is the link between hypermasculinity and phallogocentrism in art.

In order to extend Schneider and Jones’ work I ask, how are Spiritualist vaginal performances connected – through gesture, themes, and intention – to explicit body feminist performance art of the latter twentieth century? How can considering these specific Spiritualist performances alongside the work of performance artists who make use of the body in similar ways create a space for Spiritualist performance in a constellation of feminist performance art? How does this effectively work to reframe Spiritualist performance, imbuing it with a new take on the agency of the performer, and at the same time complicate existing performance art genealogies? And what are the implications of calling, or thinking about, something as performance art when it was not intended as such? Given the explicit nature of the performances I analyze, they have been subject to scrutiny not dissimilar to the debunker/Spiritualist dynamic. How then, might the role of the critic or legislator intent on stopping these performances from happening compare to/find relevance in the concept of debunker discourse?

This study attempts to expand the historical lens to complicate the simplistic binaries of Spiritualist/scientist, believer/non-believer, and performance/life to show how they are all much more interrelated. This provides a method of critique from which to

evaluate the various systems of power that underpin such binaries – patriarchy, cis-heterosexuality, capitalism, religion, white supremacy, and colonialism – and to suggest an alternate way of thinking about these performances.

Scope & Focus

The constellations of texts I draw from in this dissertation chart my own interests, training, and life experiences. In building this project, I considered many possible examples of believer/debunker confrontations. I have chosen to focus on Spiritualists and “men of science” in Britain and Northern Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for a number of reasons. First, both of these groups integrated a high degree of theatricality into their practices, making them ideal subjects for a Performance Studies reading. As a lover of popular culture, the opportunity to deconstruct and analyse the widespread popular appeal/craze for Spiritualism appeals to me, as do the various ways in which celebrity and performance are important parts of science communication. As all popular culture devotees know, these sites of widespread popular appeal and/or contestation are always expressions of deeper cultural interests, values, and anxieties. Concepts that are essential to my study – the establishment of strict gender binaries, and the professionalization of science (which was foundational to the debunker position) – were established and enforced in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Even so, the types of conversations, debates, and anxieties surrounding gender during that time (e.g. anxieties about women’s sexuality, and anxieties about what masculinity should look like) continue to be remarkably resonant to our contemporary period, a phenomenon scholars refer to as the “Victorian Afterlife” (first coined by scholars John Kucich and

Dianne F. Sadoff in their 2000 book *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*). This term is particularly resonant for my project, where the literal afterlives of Victorians were so vigorously debated and contested by Spiritualists and scientists. Likewise, the image of “scientist” as it was constructed in the latter half of the nineteenth century is echoed in contemporary visions of the scientist in the popular imagination. Making the connections across time periods is thus important to understanding how and why that came to be, and what the implications of that are in our contemporary era.

Spiritualism has received considerable scholarly attention, from a variety of different disciplinary perspectives. My particular interests in embodiment and feminist performance art drew me to specific instances of Spiritualist performances where the Medium’s body, and in particular, vaginal space is a locus for belief/disbelief. I was first introduced to Kathleen Goligher’s story via a peculiar photograph that I discovered through my own reading (Fig. 2). The image depicts her sitting rigidly in a chair, something mysterious and white appearing from between her legs and pooling on the floor in front of her. The humorous image piqued my interest, as did learning more about the young Medium from Belfast who had supposedly produced ectoplasm out of her vagina, a gesture that, to my mind, mirrored feminist explicit body performance art from the latter twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and got to the heart of the patriarchal fear, confusion, and regulation of the female body. Goligher’s séance performances were extensively documented in William Jackson Crawford’s writings – three books and numerous dispatches in the Spiritualist periodical press – which provided a wealth of primary sources from which to analyse not only Goligher’s and Crawford’s performances



Fig. 2. Medium Kathleen Goligher with ectoplasm emerging from between her legs. Photographed by William J. Crawford, 1920. Public domain.

but also the scientist/Spiritualist and scientist/debunker performances that they elicited. These include debunker texts written by Charles M. Beadnell and E.E. Fournier d'Albe, which provided direct attacks on the veracity of Crawford and Goligher's claims – rich texts for me to analyze.

In order to define debunker discourse I looked to the previous century, a time during which the role of the professional scientist was first being established. Irish physicist John Tyndall felt like a natural entry point for me to contextualise how scientific identity shifted during the nineteenth century, and came to be associated with a

particular kind of rugged masculinity and, at times, combative discourse. Tyndall performed this rhetorical position in his missives against a science founded on religious beliefs rather than empirical facts based on observations. A member of the influential Scientific Naturalists group, Tyndall was a prolific educator, writer, and populariser of science. This last point is of particular interest to me because it speaks to the methods and styles by which scientific information is disseminated to the non-expert public, which is of significant relevance when analyzing the rhetoric of scientific debunkers. Though not a part of the Goligher/Crawford Spiritualist debate (having died some twenty-five years earlier), Tyndall did weigh in on Spiritualism in his essay “Science and Spirits,” which provided me with a useful starting point to define debunker discourse by using the words of one of the great “men of science” himself.

This dissertation is a work of transhistorical research, moving from the nineteenth century masculinity of Tyndall, to the early twentieth century conjuring’s of Goligher, to the late twentieth century performance art of Carolee Schneemann and Annie Sprinkle. The method of reading across historical periods acknowledges that the past is not static and meanings are not bound by their historical contexts. Past events can be reinvigorated by placing them alongside those of a different time period to create new meaning – a combination of a past and present gaze can open up new conversations or lines of inquiry. Here, as elsewhere in this dissertation the “trans” of *transhistorical* is especially relevant. Following conversations in queer and trans temporal theory,⁹ my use of the *transhistorical* exists outside of regimented, normative notions of temporality (Freeman), collapsing the binary notion of “then and now” to create a “then, and then, and then, and now,” and allowing for anachronistic connections, or “touches,” through and across time

(Dinshaw).¹⁰ The inclusion of various distinct historical moments allows for more data points, so to speak, more context, and a fuller, richer – more complicated – story.

Contributions

A major contribution of this dissertation lies in the cross-disciplinary approach I use to bring together my varied concepts and subject matter. This project sits at the intersection (or perhaps, in the Borderlands) of a variety of interdisciplinary modes: Theatre & Performance Studies, Cultural Studies, Queer and Feminist Critical Theory, and the History of Science. I use these critical frameworks and perspectives to think across and unite Spiritualism, science, embodiment, maternity, and performance art. I extend the work of scholars such as Amy Lehman, whose work primarily focuses on the theatricality of Spiritualism, and I contribute a deeper engagement with the historical antitheatrical bias that finds a fruitful hold in the criticism of women’s embodied Spiritualist performance. I also extend conversations surrounding antitheatricality to the transgender body, arguing that it is a bias that contributes not only to transphobic rhetoric about the untrustworthy nature of trans individuals, but has also been a formative dynamic in early transgender medicine.

Another significant contribution of this dissertation is my analysis of scientist debunkers. I define debunker discourse and analyse debunker texts through the lens of performance. Just as women have long been accused of being “too much,” I analyze too muchness in relation to performances of hyper-masculinity: the conflicts of the Scientific Naturalists, Spiritualism debunkers, and macho performance artists. I also significantly extend the research and analysis on Kathleen Goligher, who is rarely afforded more than

a mention – perhaps a paragraph – in other Spiritualist studies. In particular, I contribute an analysis of the sexuality of her performances, bringing the corporeal to history. Finally, a major contribution of this dissertation is to place the politics and aesthetics of performance art in conversation with Spiritualist and debunker performance. I contribute a new reading of two famous performance art pieces that interrogate the connections between expressions of “new age” spirituality and feminism, and situate my Spiritualist performer in a constellation of feminist performance artists. I also extend the concept of debunker discourse to art, modeling how the framework could be relevant to various dynamics outside of science.

The Poetic Borderlands

Throughout the dissertation I play with form by inserting sections between each chapter where I develop a theory of the “Borderlands.” Borderlands are a poetic concept, and as such a poetic treatment – outside the constraints of academic prose – is befitting. The form reflects this: brief interludes in the interstitial space¹¹ between chapters that bridge topics, and offer a space to expand upon ideas that do not necessarily fit elsewhere. The Borderlands are metaphor, illuminating concept, and connective thread. They are slippery, porous, and non-binary. They are a place to explore that which exists in the Borderland spaces between science/Spiritualism, life/death, men/women, and authority/fraud (to name but a few), and demonstrate the transgressive quality of that which cannot be pinned down.

This project does not deal with physical, geographical borderlands. However, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge how the rise of violent nationalism and border

crises raging throughout the Americas and across the world demonstrates how Borderlands are highly politicized physical and ideological spaces. What might it mean to theorize “Borderlands” as a metaphor at this particular historical moment? To this I argue that “border” is a term that I am using precisely because of its political valences, i.e. the often-violent ways in which boundaries are policed. This underlines the inherent risk of existing in or travelling through the Borderlands – for specific people and bodies, the stakes are always high.

I am indebted to the pioneering Chicana queer feminist work *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa and her notion of the Borderlands, which I draw on and extend. Our projects differ greatly – Anzaldúa wrote about physical borderlands, specifically the United States/Mexico border. Her work blends autobiography, poetry, and prose; and though highly intellectual and citing a rich variety of sources, it is not a scholarly book in the traditional sense. The imbrication of our projects is in the shared use of the Borderlands as a metaphor for ambiguous, complex, meaning-rich zones. Anzaldúa writes about the Borderlands¹² as being simultaneously physical spaces, metaphorical states, and loci of identity formation. In particular she uses the borderlands as a metaphor to write about her Mestiza (mixed race, Anglo/Indigenous) and Chicana heritage and queer identity. She writes,

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal.’ (Anzaldúa 17)

In Anzaldúa’s work, the Borderlands, as sites of constant transition where non-normative subjects can find a homeplace,¹³ are rich in generative theoretical and artistic potential. The concept of the Borderlands also prefigures Anzaldúa’s work by about a century in a context more closely tied to my research here. The Victorian Spiritualist periodical *Borderland: A Quarterly Review and Index*, in print from 1893-1897, was a venue for editor and proprietor William Thomas Stead (an ardent Spiritualist) to disseminate writings on occult practices such as clairvoyance, palmistry, and astrology (Fig. 3). While I do not rely much on the periodical itself in my research (the archives of the weekly British periodical *Light: A Journal of Psychical, Occult, and Mystical Research* were more relevant to my focus), I became interested in Stead’s use of the term “Borderland” as it applies to Spiritualism – the realm between the living and the dead across which Spiritualists claim to be able to communicate.



Fig. 3. An 1893 cover of *Borderland: A Quarterly Review and Index*, published by W.T. Stead. Public domain, via University of Miami Libraries Special Collections.

“Borders” and “borderlands” have also been central to Performance Studies, notably through the concept of “liminality.” In his 2001 book *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* Jon McKenzie writes, “within Performance Studies...performance has become defined as a “liminal” process, a reflexive transgression of social structures. Marginal, on the edge, in the interstices of institutions and at their limits, liminal performances are capable of temporarily staging and subverting their normative functions” (8). The concept of “liminality” as it would come to be applied to Performance Studies was first developed by American folklorist Arnold van Gennep in the early twentieth century to describe rites of passage, such as initiation, that mark the transition from one life stage to another. In the 1960s anthropologist Victor Turner repopularized and extended van Gennep’s concept, and went on to collaborate with Richard Schechner to join Anthropology and Theatre into the new discipline of Performance Studies. For both Schechner and Turner “liminality” was closely tied to ritual, and efficacious performance (which I expand on in the section below on antitheatricity). At the turn of the twenty-first century, four decades into Performance Studies occupying its own distinct discipline, Jon McKenzie coined the term “liminal norm” to describe the ways in which “the persistent use of this concept within the field has made liminality into something of a norm.” He expands on this paradox, writing, “the liminal-norm operates in any situation where the valorization of liminal transgression or resistance itself becomes normative—at which point theorization of such a norm may become subversive” (50).¹⁴

Borders, specifically, have also been important sites of critical inquiry in Performance Studies. Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young’s 2011 anthology

Performance in the Borderlands focuses on cultural performances that relate to borders that divide North America, including the Caribbean. Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña takes up similar concerns in his 2011 book *Conversations Across Borders: A Performance Artist Converses with Theorists, Curators, Activists and Fellow Artists* (edited by Laura Levin). And the Hemispheric Institute of Performance & Politics (based out of New York University) is a multi-lingual network of artists, scholars, and community workers that works across the borders of the Americas, while creating and preserving work that interrogates “borders” as both physical space and figurative concept.

My theorization of the Borderlands, insofar as it is an argument against binary classifications, is also indebted to Rebecca Schneider’s work on “binary terror.” A major theoretical framework of Schneider’s book *The Explicit Body in Performance* is her actively working against binary thinking. Schneider borrows the term “binary terror” from theatre scholar Vivian Patraha, and defines it as, “The terror that accompanies the dissolution of a binary habit of sense-making and self-fashioning [which] is directly proportionate to the social safety insured in the maintenance of such apparatus of sense” (13). In other words, when socially inscribed binaries such as man/woman or art/pornography are troubled, or indeed collapse, the attendant terror (seen, for example, in far-right political backlash to feminism) is proportionate to how important those binaries are to upholding a status quo. Binary terror – the fear of the loss of one’s understanding of self and world (especially on the part of the privileged) – is often manipulated for political ends. In this dissertation this act of manipulation, or defense of binaries, becomes evident in relation to issues such as the drive to define and prescribe gender roles during the nineteenth century, which extended to scientific epistemologies,

and the meaning inscribed on women's, AFAB, and trans bodies. An attunement to, and ability to play with, the concept of binary terror is also the political force behind works of feminist critique – both theoretical and artistic. The performance artists I discuss in this dissertation act at various moments as binary terrorists, and in my concept of the Borderlands I advocate for sitting comfortably in this discomfort.

In my study I extend the concept of the Borderlands to multiple liminal spaces: the séance room itself, the Medium's body, vaginal space, the space between competing epistemologies, and historical periods. In doing so, I argue for the value of the Borderlands as a philosophical approach, and reflect on the ways in which research processes themselves can reside there.

Methodology

My methodological approach is situated in Performance Studies, a discipline that takes a broad approach to performances, identifying that they take place not only on stage, screen, or in galleries, but in almost every aspect of life – from language, pop culture, religious practices, politics and civic events, to the various ways that individuals construct and present their identity. Crucially, this framework considers, as performance scholar Jon McKenzie notes, “the concept of performance as the embodied enactment of cultural forces” (8). In other words, we can use performance to understand – and deconstruct – cultural categories such as gender, race, sexuality, religion, etc. Like other scholars who write at the intersection of performance and science, I hold the two alongside each other in order to deconstruct the performances of science and the cultural significance of these performances. In the introduction to the first of their two volume

anthologies *Identity, Culture, and the Science Performance* Vivian Appler and Meredith Conti write,

Like the clinical laboratory and astronomical observatory, performance serves as a reflexive and generative site of transformations, of penetrating barriers, and testing innovative ideas, approaches, and praxes. Theatre, dance, and other forms of human performance, then, operate as viable laboratories for community conversations, ethical debates, and knowledge generation about and within contested socio-scientific structures. They also help to place identity center stage in ways that are variously provocative, problematic, nuanced, and recuperative. (4)

Central to using performance to make sense of and analyze culture is the understanding that performances *do* things. Linguist J.L. Austin's 1965 book *How to do things with words*, is considered a foundational text for Performance Studies, wherein he articulates "performative utterances," as the types of language (as in the case of promises or law) that have the power to actually *do* something. Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler built upon this in order to develop their concept of performativity, which extended Austin's notion of performative utterances, by theorizing how gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (519). Like performative utterances, Butler theorized that by performing one's gender, one becomes it – and, through the continuous repetition of such stylized acts, remains in a constant state of this becoming. By situating myself in a Performance Studies context, I take concepts such as these as givens, and extend them through my own work.

This, however, should not be taken to mean that all concepts within Performance Studies are agreed upon or taken for granted. Despite Shakespeare's well-worn observation that "all the world's a stage," there are still some boundaries, or at least disagreements about where the boundaries of such a stage lie. It is therefore a part of my

methodology to define my usage of some of the terms that remain hotly contested within the field. Examples of this include the differences between theatre and performance (and theatre versus performance art), performativity versus performativeness, and antitheatricity or anti-theatrical prejudice.

In this study I draw from a wide range of texts: critical theory, performance art, popular culture, images, and primary sources such as books, periodicals, letters, and obituaries from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My methods for accessing and interpreting these texts involve archival research, image analysis, and performance analysis. I utilize the Performance Studies approaches of reading texts that were not intended as such *as* performances, and also reimagining theatrical forms and structure *themselves* as analytical tools (for example, in Chapter 3 where I read a scientific text through the dramaturgical structure of a burlesque act). Close reading is a particularly important methodology that I draw on. I consider it a privilege and delight to openly attend to texts, worlds, and objects in the focused, sustained manner that close reading allows. As Elizabeth Freeman writes, “To close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying, and to hold out that these activities can allow us to look both hard and askance at the norm” (xvi-xvii). I bring my own positionality to this method by doing close reading, queerly. What does a queer (and to be more specific, lesbian-feminist) lens bring to close reading? What does this embodied subjectivity allow, engender, and open-up in the research and writing process? What is it attuned to? Freeman makes the connection between queerness and close reading, writing, “This is the legacy I wish to honor here, that of queers as close enough readers of one another and of dominant culture to gather up, literally, life’s outtakes and waste products and bind them into fictitious but

beautiful (w)holes” (xxii). As Freeman alludes to, queer people, out of necessity, are close readers. Sometimes this is borne out of safety, as is the case with other marginalized groups (i.e. is this person clocking me, and am I therefore in danger?). Often it is a close reading of potentially erotically charged encounters (i.e. was she just being friendly, or was she hitting on me?).

Given the transhistorical nature of this project an important source for my research are archives. I primarily draw on digital archives, including the British Periodicals database, the Irish Newspaper Archives, the British Newspaper Archive, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, and the online archives of the artists Carolee Schneemann (maintained by the Carolee Schneemann Foundation) and Annie Sprinkle. I was delighted to find that Spiritualists are excellent archivists, in that they are invested in documenting their practices and papers, and the International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals (IAPSOP) in particular was of great use to me. Because of the time periods that I focus on in my study, many primary sources have entered the public domain and were available on the Internet Archive, which was immensely helpful.

My approach to archival research is both playful and queer. As a lover of history and historical objects, I delight in exploring the ephemera of the past. I also bring a queer lens to this research process. What does it mean to see the archive queerly? Feminist scholar Ann Cvetkovich has written extensively about queer archival methodologies, including, notably, what she calls “archives of feelings” – elusive archival materials such as oral histories, performances, ephemera, and gesture that assist scholars in getting to the root of queer affective realities (Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*). Cvetkovich writes

about “queering” the archive by “return[ing] to conventional archives from the vantage point of radical and alternative forms of archival practice, research, and exhibition” (“Queering Archives” 219). For me, this means being particularly attuned to instances of queer potentiality, of self-conscious theatricality,¹⁵ of winks, nods, or allusions-to, of magic, and erotics.

Here I think alongside performance artist Jess Dobkin, who has mined the magical queer performance potential of archives, describing them as portals. Dobkin writes of archives as, “playing with dynamic, bendy time. Like performance, the archive is a place of energy exchange, and the materials are activated by our presence and engagement...and also...a kind of utopia – like the afterlife, like outer space – of expansive, radial possibility, a place where we can face all directions and times at once” (qtd. in Chhangur 13). The energy exchange of the archives that Dobkin describes is similar to the energy exchange enacted by Mediums, who like archives, act as portals through which we can access the knowledge and ephemera of the past.

Humour is another important part of my methodology and approach, and I hold that the subjects and objects I examine are both worthy of scholarly attention, and at times, very funny. Performing research with a sense of humour is related to humour-as-queer-aesthetic, where it is often deployed as both a method of critique and tool of survival. Using humour allows me to inject an essential part of myself into my writing and critical analysis, and I had fun doing it. Humour also extends to the types of subjects and topics I cover, drawing from what Lauren Berlant and Jack Halberstam have called the “silly archive,” that is, sources that may be considered “low” and as Halberstam writes, “do not make us better people or liberate us from the culture industry, but they

might offer strange and anticapitalist logics of being and acting and knowing, and they will harbour covert and overt queer worlds” (*Low Theory* 19-20).¹⁶

Situating Myself

One of the tensions at the centre of this project is the division between science and Spiritualism.¹⁷ In my writing I try to maintain a critical distance in order to consider and analyse the performances on both sides of this debate, though in truth I am much more personally aligned with the scientific perspective than the Spiritualist one. My personal belief systems are technically incompatible with Spiritualism in that I do not believe in an afterlife, which would preclude the ability to communicate with those who may or may not inhabit it. That being said, extending that disbelief, especially towards a goal of ridiculing or calling someone a liar is exactly the type of discourse that I critique in this dissertation. I wish to take seriously the beliefs of others, and am particularly sympathetic to the myriad life experiences for which spiritual belief systems are a salve. Spiritualism, especially as it existed at the heights of its popularity in Europe and North America, was a complex practice. There was undoubtedly “fraud” Spiritualists who for various reasons of their own (money, notoriety, etc.) were quick to prey on the belief of others. There were also those who clearly held sincere belief in their abilities and attempted to use them to help people. It is these distinctions that debunker discourse collapses, which I do not. Ultimately, I attempt to suspend my disbelief in order to consider these practices, with the humility to freely admit that I do not know what happens after death any more than everyone else who has yet to experience it. I am okay with this ambiguity – I do not need to believe in order to understand that others do.

Perhaps what is most ironic about the Spiritualism/science divide is that like Spiritualists, scientists also attempt to find meaning, comfort, and understanding through their work. In the instances of the scientists I write about here, this means a quest for knowledge with proof that can take the uncertainty out of belief. This is one of the things that is at stake with debunkers – a defensiveness towards their worldview, and attendant dismay when others do not share it. In contrast to Spiritualists, the position of the scientist debunkers I write about is much more personally legible to me. I was exposed to these discourses from an early age, am at home around them, and speak the language. My ability to inhabit (or at least recognize) these positions is what makes me particularly interested in the rhetorical position and motivations of debunkers, and how social forces such as masculinity, expertise, and authority shape their discourses. If the desire to believe is a fundamental part of the human experience, so too are the myriad ways in which human complexity can get in the way of the high minded goals of scientific epistemologies.

For a project that deals so deeply with embodied experience, I believe it is important to situate my own body (which at various points throughout this project has been a body shaped by the various affective realities of dissertation writing: stress, joy, guilt, exhaustion, frustration, elation etc.). I am a white, queer, femme-presenting woman in a body that has had a very particular impact on how I am perceived and treated in this world, especially insofar as sexuality and intelligence are presumed. But by far my most significant embodied experience that has corresponded with the creation of this work is maternity. My daughter has been with me throughout this entire process – through pregnancy, birth, and early childhood she has lived both inside my body, and alongside it.

The marks of this are as distinct on this dissertation as they are my body. It has opened up a positionality that is particularly attuned towards the complex interplay between self and other, a consideration of vaginal space that is shaped by the transformative (for better and worse) experience of birth, and the power of having created life from one's own corporeality. Both scientific and spiritual understanding has profoundly impacted my experience of motherhood, and that finds its expression here in these pages.

Definition of Terms

There are ongoing debates within Theatre and Performance Studies with regards to a number of central terms that I use in this dissertation: performance, performative, theatre, theatrical. Performance, in particular is a word that can have multiple meanings across disciplines. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of "Performance" demonstrates the varied uses of the term, which include: "the doing of an action or operation," "the capabilities, productivity, or success of a machine, product, or person when measured against a standard," "the action of performing a play, piece of music, ceremony, etc.," and "a public appearance by a performing artist or artists of any kind" ("Performance"). With the formation of Performance Studies as a distinct field in the 1970s, concepts surrounding performance have been expanded upon and debated by scholars. Richard Schechner, the theatre maker and scholar who established Performance Studies as an academic field is notable for establishing the language of performance theory. In his influential textbook *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (now in its fourth edition), Schechner defines performance as,

A broad spectrum of actions ranging from play, games, sports, popular entertainments, and rituals to the performing arts, professional roles, political

personae, media, and the construction of race, gender, and identity in everyday life. To perform is to act in a play, to dance, to make music; to play your life roles as friend, child, parent, student, and so on; to pretend or make believe; to engage in sports and games; to enact sacred and secular rituals; to argue a case in court or present a PowerPoint in class...and many more activities too. (1)

Despite this wide ranging and seemingly inclusive definition (intended as a primer for students), in his scholarly work Schechner has differentiated between concepts such as theatre and performance arguing, for example, in his 1977 book *Performance Theory*, the difference between efficacy in performance (performance that produces “results” in the “real world”) and performance that is mere entertainment.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I tend to use many of these terms interchangeably and do not adhere to strict divisions between say, theatre and performance. I agree with Theatre Studies scholar Stephen J. Bottoms when he writes,

My own inclination is to view everything from written plays to group-devised performances to street interventions to installation art as existing on an identifiable continuum of performance practices, and engaging in different ways with underlying questions of site, text, spectatorship, representation, cultural context, and so on. (173)

In my opinion life can be theatrical, theatre can be performative, and dogmatic distinctions between the two are far more present for those inside, rather than outside of academia. However, despite a lesser engagement with the minutiae of performance than Theatre and Performance Studies scholars, it is difficult to ignore the various ways in which theoretical concepts have percolated into the mainstream consciousness. For example, in recent years the term “performative wokeness” has become a popular way to describe the self-conscious (and perhaps cynical) manner in which people perform their left-leaning political affiliations, especially online. Performance Studies scholars like Brian Batchelor have also taken up this facet of performativity in their writing. In his

2021 article “Committing to Commitment: The Trudeauian Nonperformative” Batchelor reads (now former) Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s performative act of kneeling in solidarity with antiracism protesters in 2020 as a failed, or “unhappy” performative in the Austinian sense (i.e. his commitment to fighting systemic racism did not, in fact, translate into substantive, meaningful change). However, Batchelor argues that Trudeau’s performative act actually aligns with what Sarah Ahmed calls a nonperformative: an institutional performative act that (cynically) succeeds precisely because it does not do what it claims to. In other words, the theatrical act – with no follow through – is a success for the powerful institution, which does not need to follow through with any commitment to change and thus maintains the status quo.

One particularly far-ranging concept that is important to this dissertation and will thus benefit from an overview is antitheatricality, or anti-theatrical prejudice. The suspect nature of performance is founded on the idea that because it is aligned with staging, representation, and artifice, performance is the antithesis to truth. In the popular imagination performance brings to mind entertainment¹⁸ – and especially “acting” – rather than a process that people undertake as a part of everyday “authentic” life. How, one might ask, can you possibly trust someone who is performing? In his monumental work on the subject, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (1981), Jonas A. Barish writes about, “a prejudice against the theatre that goes back as far in European history as the theatre itself can be traced” (1). Barish goes so far as to ascribe a universality to antitheatricality, writing that it, “comes to appear as a kind of ontological malaise, a condition inseparable from our beings, which we can no more discard than we can shed our skins. It would seem to reflect something permanent about the way we think of ourselves and our lives”

(2). In her book *Antitheatricality and the Body Public* (2017), Lisa A. Freeman complicates Barish's reading of antitheatricality as an ontological state, and posits "the more likely possibility that those intermittent irruptions of antitheatrical sentiment are actually the effects of what Barish dismisses, in almost the same breath, as 'local considerations'" (2). Freeman contributes nuance to the antitheatrical discussion by, "situating antitheatrical incidents as rich and interpretable cultural performances in themselves, [seeking] to account fully for the significance of these historical conflicts; to delineate when, why, and how anxieties about representation manifest themselves; and to trace the actual politics that govern these ostensibly aesthetic and moral debates" (Freeman 2). In spite of his essentialist reading of antitheatricality, Barish demonstrates the lengthy history of the phenomena, and the degree to which it is integrated into culture. As this relates to language, he writes,

Most epithets derived from the arts are laudatory when applied to the other arts, or to life. If one describes a landscape as 'poetic,' or a man's struggle with adversity as 'epic,' or a woman's beauty as 'lyric,' one is using terms of praise... But with infrequent exceptions, terms borrowed from the theater – *theatrical, operatic, melodramatic, stagey*, etc. – tend to be hostile or belittling. And so do a wide range of expressions drawn from theatrical activity expressly to convey disapproval: *acting, play acting, playing up to, putting on an act, putting on a performance, making a scene, making a spectacle of oneself, playing to the gallery*, and so forth. (Barish 1)

In Euro-American patriarchal culture, women in particular are aligned with theatricality (Fig. 4) – so much so that in the history of Western theatre women were barred from performing on the stage for over 350 years because of a belief that they were too susceptible. As Performance Studies scholar Laura Levin, referencing Adorno, notes, "women have long been associated with the 'cruder connotations of imitation – fakeness, reproduction, resemblance'" (18).



Fig. 4. *Evanoui or Swoon* (Alternately titled *Abandoned*) by James Tissot, oil on canvas, 1872. Public domain.

This association between women and fakeness finds expression in the culturally constructed, enforced, and – if done “correctly,” rewarded – emphasis on women’s theatrical markings of appearance and vanity such as makeup, styled-hair, and fashion (costume). Cultural Studies and Visual Culture scholarship, such as Maria Elena Buszek’s *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (2006), has complicated the second wave critique of a focus on appearance as playing into patriarchal power structures, pointing to women’s self-fashioning, and indeed mimicking of patriarchal tropes, as a potential site for self-expression and transgression. This, however, does not change the fact that under patriarchy, women are positioned as always available to the spectatorial gaze. This compulsory gaze is especially true for those who are marked by obvious difference: bodies that are racialized, disabled, visibly queer, trans, or gender non-conforming. “Don’t be so dramatic,” and “calm down” are familiar refrains to women. Here, “dramatic” is a stand-in for “expressively emotional,” a state that is

aligned with femininity, weakness, and lack of (masculine) mental fortitude and even-temperedness. Ideas about what constitutes “appropriate” levels of emotion to show are also racially and class coded, and linked to the colonial project of civility.¹⁹ The right kind of woman (read: white, straight, affluent, etc.) should know how and where to demonstrate emotion in acceptable ways. Under patriarchy, where emotions are so strongly aligned with weakness and Otherness, there are specific culturally and socially permissible spaces where performances of big emotions can exist – for example sporting matches, an interest that is generally coded masculine.

The term “drama queen” is commonly invoked for women – a term that is almost never used to refer to men, with the exception perhaps of effeminate queer men, and even then the association with femininity is intended as denigration. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a “drama queen” as a “person, esp. a woman or girl, who overreacts to a minor setback or who is prone to exaggeratedly dramatic behaviour; (also) a person who thrives on being the centre of attention.” Interestingly, this definition has shifted over time, as noted by Josh Chetwynd in *Totally Scripted: Idioms, Words and Quotes from Hollywood to Broadway that have Changed the English Language*. The OED dates the earliest recorded usage of the term to a 1923 magazine article in *House & Garden*. Here the term is seemingly expressed as simply a descriptor of an actress, though perhaps not value-neutral. (For example, in her excellent study *Actresses and Whores* (2005) Kirsten Pullen details how actresses have been associated with prostitution since at least the Byzantine period with the figure of Empress Theodora.) *Cassell’s Dictionary of Slang* places the shift to the more modern usage in the 1960s, when the expression became one widely used amongst gay men as a snarky name for the overly expressive (Chetwynd 62).

No doubt the term was already widely in use by then, and the term's negative connotations towards women would almost certainly have already been in place. A hallmark of cisgendered white gay male culture is a veneration of theatrical women, in particular actresses, often coupled with a barely below the surface streak of misogyny. By the 1970s the term "drama queen" was regularly appearing in print, and by the 90s it appears to have fully entered the cultural lexicon (Chetwynd 62). Another important – and historically laden – term related to the question of gender and emotion is hysteria, which I unpack in Chapter 1.

Religious arguments against theatre and performers are also vital aspects of antitheatricality – what according to Barish could be called a "local consideration," a term that does little to contextualize how wide ranging and deeply held these beliefs are. For example, Deuteronomy 22:5 states, "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God" (The Holy Bible, *King James Version*, Deut. 22.5). This passage can be interpreted as a condemnation against cross-dressing, a theatrical practice that has existed since Ancient Greece,²⁰ and is present across cultures including China, Japan, India, and Europe (see Fig. 5). For religious practitioners such as fundamental and evangelical Christians who interpret Biblical scripture literally, this marks such theatre as sacrilegious practice. It also, significantly, continues to undergird Christian anti-queer and anti-trans arguments today.

An important element of antitheatrical discourse has to do with what I term the "too muchness"²¹ of performers. That is, the instances in which one is inspired to roll their eyes at someone who is being *too much*. Actors and performers can veer into the



Fig. 5. Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet, 1899. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

the category of too muchness when they express, amongst other things, vanity, self-absorption, self-seriousness, and a deep, earnest conviction in their work (which can be written off as frivolous). Too muchness is embodied in “Theatre Kid” energy and expressed in the unselfconscious taking up of space and demanding of attention. It can be exhausting to be around someone who is overtly performing. Paradoxically, this is a part of why we love them: for the performances and personality that they bring when they are off stage (do these people ever truly believe in being “off”?). To hear a diva opine on her own brilliance and self-importance is in itself a campy, spectator’s delight.²²

It should be noted that self-seriousness is hardly absent from other artistic disciplines, and there is an obvious gendered element to critiques of it. Where male artists have historically been granted the title of artistic genius, which is often wielded as an excuse for bad behaviour, a woman who is attention seeking or openly desirous of an audience is perceived as distasteful. There is a pervasive North American cultural belief

that the desire for attention, and in particular expressly seeking it out, is perverse and embarrassing. “Attention seeking” is wielded as insult – commonly amongst girls and women – and the desire to be seen is transfigured into a negative attribute. And yet, it may be one of the most basic of human desires: to be seen, to be known, to be acknowledged by others. Thus, there is an obvious tension between our collective investment in public figures and celebrities, and our desire to break them down (both, it should be said, are fabulous opportunities to be a part of an active or invested audience). That is, to critique or question a performer’s position, with a common refrain being they do not deserve it, and to attempt to contribute to their downfall. The propping up of celebrity, in the case of artists, also relies on buying into an idea of artistic genius that is based upon a myth of singularity: that true artistic talent is somehow naturally rewarded with an audience; that there are not a million other worthy talents out there; that privilege and nepotism and dumb-luck are not a big part of who gets recognized. This all goes to mask the hard work – the “hustle” – that goes into getting oneself seen on a wider, public level. This also applies to those outside of the artistic, or more formal performance umbrella. The desire to make a contribution to your field and to have your work, or your ideas, engaged with is a desire to be *seen*. I will return to this idea in the second chapter where I examine the performative strategies of scientists and intellectuals, and the marked gendering of the discourses surrounding them.

What of this argument and idea of too muchness in the digital, and in particular, social media age where the idea of the performative self-as-commodity is so normalized? The ability of everyday people to engage in mediated – and constructed – performances of self through participation in social media and reality television (oftentimes one being

dependent on the other) and to easily find an audience for their performances is unprecedented and unparalleled. The non-expert pop culture consumer commonly discusses observations and analyses that were once the domain of Performance Studies, such as the construction of self through persona, or issues of authenticity in performance. And yet I would contend that even in the midst of this fluency with complex ideas surrounding performance and the so-called democratization of the ability to reach a wide audience, there remains a contempt for this too muchness. One need look no further than comment sections on websites and social media, or the familiar cycle of come-up and take-down of Internet performers,²³ to glimpse the paradoxical antitheatrical embrace of performers and the concurrent critique of the desire to perform. Within this there is an irony – or perhaps, self-aware performance – of commenters publicly posting critiques and takedowns in order to perform their own moral and/or intellectual superiority.

Having explored various facets of antitheatrical discourse, and established that performance is considered by many to be highly suspect, I now turn my attention to the ways in which performance art is seen as especially so. Out of all of the arts performance art is synonymous with nonsense to many people,²⁴ and is often the butt of jokes or used as pejorative metaphor.²⁵ Someone is doing something strange or outrageous? Call it performance art.²⁶ As Bryony White writes in her essay “‘Performance Art’ as Pejorative,” performance art is seen as, “ridiculous and over-indulgent, so we must make it a joke in order to subsume or placate this horrific otherness” (White). In fairness, plenty of performance art is outrageous, and sometimes complete nonsense. However, it seems that what makes performance art particularly subject to derision is the fact that it is not always accessible or easily understood, can come off as elitist, or possesses a type of

earnestness that makes people uncomfortable. Here, too, my notion of the too muchness of the performer applies.

What complicates this is the fact that many performance art pieces have the explicit aim of creating a sense of unease or discomfort in the viewer/audience.

Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña acknowledges the performance art stigma in his essay/manifesto “In Defense of Performance Art,” the title of which suggests an awareness that performance art does indeed need defending (from cultural ridicule, marginalization within the mainstream – generally materially based – art world, etc.). He writes,

The stakes are so low in our field... We see our probable future reflected in the eyes of the homeless, the poor, the unemployed, the diseased, and the newly arrived immigrants... in the eyes of others, we appear to be very self-involved, as if the entire universe revolved around our psyche and body. Often [performance artists'] main struggle is precisely to escape our subjectivity... I re-read [what I've just written] and get angry with myself. I sound like a fucking nineteenth-century bohemian. (80)

Gómez-Peña's quote demonstrates a sly self-awareness and ability to self-deprecate, something not always present in the more earnest and self-serious performance artists who perhaps for this reason are easier to write-off. This is an especially desirable quality in a performance artist who himself has created works that intentionally – or that aim to at least – arouse a sense of discomfort in the viewer.

Gómez-Peña, alongside artist Coco Fusco played with this tension in their 1992-93 *The Couple in the Cage* performances. Gómez-Peña and Fusco, who are Mexican/Chicano and Cuban-American respectively, staged a travelling performance where they presented themselves as specimens of an unspecified “Amerindian” tribe on display in a large cage. The performance referenced the long history of colonized peoples

being subject to display for the entertainment of largely European audiences, often under the auspices of education and curiosity regarding different cultures, but more objectively as an expression of the desire to gawk at difference – with a major power differential involved. The performance was intended as satire, but the location of the stage/cage at and within various cultural institutions (universities and museums, but also the Smithsonian and Australian Museum of Natural History) coupled with deeply ingrained colonial ideas about Indigeneity gave it an air of authority in the eyes of many audience members. Gómez-Peña and Fusco played with this slippage by incorporating increasingly ludicrous actions into their performances, practically daring the spectators to reveal their biases by not “getting” the joke. Ultimately, audiences interacting with the performance became a part of the documentation, which juxtaposed with clips from ethnographic films to make their point even more clear, became a piece in and of itself.

Also significant to the denigration of the medium is the fact that many of the most prominent and important performance artists during the past fifty years have been women – Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, Marina Abramovic, Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, Cindy Sherman, Annie Sprinkle, Karen Finley, and Rebecca Belmore, to name only a few. Performance Studies has and continues to be a space for female scholars to carve out a place of intellectual authority, in particular because of the disciplinary attention paid to issues such as subjectivity, the constructed nature of identity, spectatorial relationships, affect, and embodiment.

Performance Studies provides a perspective from which to trouble the idea of authenticity inherent in many people’s understanding of performance, and to show that the binary of authentic/inauthentic is a false one. This is particularly relevant to my

analysis of Spiritualist and scientist debunkers for a number of reasons. My argument about debunker responses to Spiritualist Medium's performances is grounded, in part, in an understanding of the association of women with theatricality and deceit (which I expand upon at length in Chapter 1). Because women are assumed to be inherently theatrical beings, there is a built-in assumption of a proclivity towards inauthenticity, which find expression in debunker attacks. I further complicate ideas of authenticity/inauthenticity by demonstrating the ways in which debunkers *also* engage in performances. In doing so I build upon the Performance Studies understanding that identity is performed, and in fact made up of multiple repetitious (and not necessarily conscious) performances. Does this formulation of identity construction mean that personal identity is inauthentic? It is questions such as this that performance artists love to play with in their work, using the medium of performance to interrogate issues of identity, persona, and impersonation. As Gómez-Peña notes, "Performance has taught us an extremely important lesson: we are not straitjacketed by identity...with the use of props, make-up, accessories and costumes, we can actually reinvent our identity in the eyes of others" (79).

An interesting layer to the antitheatricality discussion is the fact that Performance Studies, as a discipline, has itself been critiqued as antitheatrical. Stephen J. Bottoms makes this argument in his essay "The Efficacy/Effeminacy Braid: Unpacking the Performance Studies/Theatre Studies Dichotomy" where he critiques Richard Schechner's idea of efficacy in relation to theatre and performance. Bottoms argues that Schechner, a founding father of Performance Studies as a discipline, was one of a few²⁷ prominent voices in the 1960s whose critiques of contemporary American theatre were

laden with homophobia. In particular, Schechner's formulation of performance as having a greater potential for "efficacy" over theatre is problematic, not least of all because his argument trots out the same tired misogyny tying theatricality to femininity – or in this case because it concerned gay men, effeminacy. Despite the slippery and permeable boundaries between theatre and performance, Schechner was able to distance the former from the latter by emphasizing the ability of performance to *do* something. According to his construction theatre was merely mimetic, representational, deceptive and worse – overrun by homosexuals. Performance on the other hand, following Austin's²⁸ "performative utterances" had the ability to express truth, make change and be "for real" versus "for show." Crucially, through this active formulation Schechner imbued performance with a sense of virility, which allowed him to rescue it from the overtly feminized, impotent theatre (and perhaps, I would add, shore up his own masculinity as someone whose life was devoted to performance).²⁹

These ideas found their expression (and validation) in the hyper-masculine ritualistic performances during the 1960s and 70s of artists such as the Viennese Actionists, Vito Acconci, Barry Le Va and Chris Burden.³⁰ These are but a few examples of men whose performances involved endurance, pain, and self (or co-performer) inflicted violence to the body – real "tough guy" stuff. Chris Burden famously had a friend shoot him in the arm in a gallery, an act supposedly meant to access some form of higher "truth" that Schechner (and for that matter, Plato) seemed similarly taken with. Burden later framed the shooting as an attempt to gain "knowledge that other people don't have, some kind of wisdom" (Warr and Jones 122). Artist self-mythologizing of this kind ignores the "wisdom" of the many people who do, in fact, have access to this

type of knowledge, from experiences much less trivial than macho-art (for example, civilians and soldiers who have survived war and/or torture). I mention hyper-masculinist performance art, and its accordant ties to supposed authenticity, because these ideas are relevant to the performances of “authentic” rugged masculinity that I analyze later in the dissertation. The masculine self-fashioning of the nineteenth-century Scientific Naturalists, typified by the mountaineering John Tyndall, is similarly built on ideas such as endurance, strength, and domination. In linking these scientist and performance artist expressions of hyper-masculinity I continue a line of thinking taken up by Amelia Jones, who analyzed phallogentrism and authenticity in her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, albeit through a very different historical trajectory.

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter one, “Drama Queens and Dissemblers: The Historical Context of Women as Performers and ‘Charlatans’,” is where I lay much of the theoretical groundwork for my study. Namely, I explore the various ways that throughout patriarchal history women have been positioned as dissemblers. I argue that the framing of women as inherently deceitful or distrustful is a hallmark of antitheatrical discourse – the cultural bias against theatricality that has been expressed in various ways since antiquity. This has particular implications for women, who since Plato, have been linked to mimesis, imitation, and fakery. In particular, I deconstruct how antitheatrical sentiment rooted in embodiment is mapped onto the maternal body, a locus of fear and disgust, and attendant desire to regulate and control on the part of patriarchy.

I extend my argument surrounding women and antitheatricity by offering a consideration of trans bodies, which I argue are similarly positioned as “lying” bodies in contemporary anti-trans rhetoric and thought. The association of women and deceit has particular relevance for debunker arguments geared towards women Spiritualist Mediums – an established cultural bias upon which to build their scientific critiques. I analyse these misogynist antitheatrical arguments against the seemingly contradictory cultural narratives surrounding women and intuition (i.e. the belief that “women’s intuition” is a specialized ontological state). This all provides important staging for the following chapters, in particular the centring of the female Spiritualist/Medium body in discourses surrounding deceit and intuition, and the attendant metaphors of birth and creation.

Chapter two, “Scientists Performing: John Tyndall, Debunker Discourse, and The Construction of Scientific Authority in the Nineteenth Century” establishes and analyses the counter-discourse to the patriarchal ideas outlined in the first chapter. Namely, the ideas that women are inherently theatrical, overly emotional, and therefore unworthy of trust are established against and justified by essentialist notions of men as being objective, dispassionate, and therefore natural authority figures. I link this to my project on science and Spiritualism by outlining how a particular type of Victorian masculinity was a vital element of the identity construction of the men of science who rose to prominence during the latter half of the nineteenth century when science in Britain was undergoing the process of professionalization. A figure who was emblematic of this “new” scientist was Scientific Naturalist John Tyndall. Tyndall is a helpful figure through which to analyse scientific performance, in particular for his role as a science educator, and his performances of Victorian hyper-masculinity as a mountaineer.

In the latter part of the Victorian period Tyndall came to symbolize the image of the scientist that continues to resonate in the popular imagination: devoted to scientific discoveries based on what is observable in nature, free from any recourse to the supernatural, with an attendant predilection to use his authoritative position to debunk intellectual antagonists in service of “defending” science. In this chapter I define and describe what I term “debunker discourse” – the various rhetorical and performative strategies deployed by scientist debunkers when squaring off against Spiritualists. I tease out the qualities and strategies of debunker discourse by performing a close reading of Tyndall’s 1864 essay “Science and Spirits,” which is one of his sole published interactions with Spiritualism.³¹ Reading the “men of science” through a debunker lens allows me to complicate the narrative of scientists (and men) as objective, detached observers, showing instead how they too utilize theatrical strategy in service of gatekeeping knowledge and authority.

Chapter three, “Pussy-as-Proscenium: The Explicit Body Performances of Kathleen Goligher,” is where I zero-in on specific Spiritualist performances and debunker confrontations that foreground embodiment. I focus on the story of Kathleen Goligher, a teenage Spiritualist Medium from Belfast who alongside her family held séance performances between 1913 and 1921. Dr. William J. Crawford, a mechanical engineering lecturer who also lived in Belfast, was a major champion of Goligher’s Mediumistic abilities. Like many other researchers of the day, Crawford was determined to design rigorous experiments in order to provide a scientific explanation and basis for Spiritualism. Crawford published the results of his experiments with Goligher across three books and numerous dispatches in the Spiritualist periodical *Light*. One of the

central questions surrounding Goligher's feats was how (and from whence) she channelled spirits into the physical matter known as ectoplasm. Crawford's theory was that psychic "plasmic rods" emanated from Goligher's body to produce acts such as rapping on and lifting tables, making impressions in clay, and touching participants in the séance circle. In reading Crawford's books it becomes increasingly clear that the ectoplasm was in fact emanating from Goligher's vagina.

In this chapter I perform a close reading of Crawford's final book, *The Psychic Structures in the Goligher Circle*, published posthumously in 1921. By reading Crawford's research according to the structure of a burlesque act, I highlight the sexuality of séances and the performance strategy of the conceal/reveal. In my analysis I make connections between Dom/sub sexual dynamics, consent, and pleasure, while exploring the complex undercurrents of Goligher's embodied performances being mediated by Crawford's scientific prose. I tease metaphors such as menstruation, pregnancy, birth, and gaps in understanding of women's sexuality out of Goligher's performances. The publicity afforded to Kathleen Goligher as a result of Crawford's involvement with her attracted the attention of Spiritualist supporters and debunkers. I sharpen my analysis of debunker discourse by performing close readings of texts by Goligher/Crawford debunkers Charles Marsh Beadnell, and E.E. Fournier d'Albe. Finally, I discuss Kathleen Goligher's life in the wake of Crawford's 1920 suicide, and what was considered the definitive debunking of her Spiritualist abilities by Fournier d'Albe in 1922.

Chapter four, "Performing Magic, Filling Holes," extends my transhistorical analysis by linking Kathleen Goligher's explicit body séance performances with feminist explicit body performance art from the latter half of the twentieth century. I accomplish

this by considering Goligher's performances against the politics and aesthetics of performance art. This allows me to put her performances into conversation with performance art where the artist's own vaginal space is deployed as an essential part of the piece. I analyse Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975/79) and Annie Sprinkle's *Post-Porn Modernist* (1989-1996) in relation to Goligher by examining them through the lenses of spirituality and magic. I then extend my analysis of debunker discourse by comparing the role of the debunker to that of art critics and legislators who sought to discredit or prevent Schneemann and Sprinkle's performances.

Placing Borderlands

*The Borderlands are that which lie between – a sometimes physical, sometimes conceptual, sometimes metaphysical space. As they are a site of ambiguity there is an irony in attempting to define or pin them down. “Define,” derived from the Latin *definire*, means to limit, determine, explain. Borderlands, as inherently liminal spaces, resist definition. To place them, then, seems more appropriate. The Borderlands are that which is located between states/spaces and are simultaneously a space of their own: dreams, notes in the margins, inter-tidal zones. They resist binary classification and understanding, existing between categories such as mind/body, head/heart, man/woman, reason/emotion, subject/object, performance/reality, truth/deceit, and past/present.*

The séance is a Borderland space – a charged room in which divisions between time/space/realms are blurred, and the living and the dead converge. In their role as mediator between these states, the Medium is a creature of the Borderlands. The Borderlands are also a place of great artistic potential (the artist’s role being to play, to ignore rules, to complicate without necessarily providing any answers). When artists work according to their intuition they are accessing the Borderlands of the unconscious and giving it form through their work. Borders are intended to bound – to contain, separate, keep-out, and reinforce difference. The Borderlands, in their multiplicity, are spaces where more than one truth can exist at once. In this refusal to sit comfortably in the “either/or” the Borderlands hold generative potential.

In this project I invite the reader to think through various Borderlands with me –

*Borderlands between science/Spiritualism
Borderlands between female/male/trans
Borderlands between intuition/intention
Borderlands between professional/layperson
Borderlands between altitudinal zones on the mountainside
Borderlands of spirituality (the “woo woo”)
Borderlands of bodies
Borderlands of performance/life
Borderlands of taste
Borderlands of art/pornography*

In doing so, I explore the possibilities therein. What can we learn from taking seriously that which lies between and beyond?

Chapter 1

Drama Queens and Dissemblers: The Historical Context of Women as Performers and “Charlatans”

Introduction

In a bewitching image from the 15 April 1919 issue of *Vogue* magazine titled, “Pearls and Tulle Spin Bridal Witcheries” (Fig. 6), a young woman poses, chin slightly tilted downwards, her gaze fixed squarely on the viewer. With the intensity of her look there is a sense that the young model – Kathleen Rose, a Ziegfeld Girl³² – is looking not at, but rather through the viewer – into their soul, or perhaps, their future. This reading is bolstered by the model’s costuming and props: Rose appears to be seated, draped in yardages of tulle and lace, and in her lap, cradled in her hands, a crystal ball. Though ostensibly an image intended to showcase the latest bridal fashions, Rose’s headgear is less bridal veil and more Valentino playing “The Sheik.”³³ This lends the image an air of the Orientalist³⁴ romantic fantasies that were all the rage at the time. It also serves to underline the exotic otherness that is fundamental to Western ideas about women who purport to be able to see through time and space as oracles, soothsayers, and clairvoyants. There is something else, unsettling, in her gaze. Is she to be trusted?

There is a tension, in Western culture, between two deeply held cultural beliefs about women. On the one hand, women are framed as inherently theatrical dissemblers who cannot be trusted. On the other, women are considered to have a privileged connection to intuition as “seers.” The purpose of this chapter is to put these two seemingly competing cultural ideas into conversation with each other, to mine the tension



Fig. 6. “Pearls and Tulle Spin Bridal Witcheries,” *Vogue*, April 15, 1919, p. 44. Baron Adolph de Meyer, photographer and designer; Dolores (Kathleen Rose) [Ziegfeld girl], model. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

between them for potentially illuminating overlaps and contradictions, and to reconceptualise this tension as a generative space.

Throughout historical Western discourse there has been a particularly close alignment between women – who are often regarded as naturally theatrical – and performance. Beyond the belief that women are simply more theatrical than men is the belief that women are naturally dissemblers. The association of women and deceit stretches back to antiquity – a notable example being Eve in the book of Genesis, who would become a touchstone for the concept of the threat of female sexuality, and the masculine desire to control the female body through ideology, regulation, representation, and objectification. Paradoxically, there is an equally ancient and pervasive notion that

women have a heightened connection to intuition, extra rational understanding, and clairvoyance. This is expressed in the belief “feminine intuition” and the close alignment between women, psychics, Mediums, and witches.

I begin by using the work of prominent feminist theorists to argue that the antitheatrical discourse aimed at women is situated in women’s very biological difference. That is, the root of patriarchal distrust of women can be traced to the biological female body, and the threat of female sexuality, in particular reproductive sexuality. I argue that from a patriarchal perspective, *women’s bodies lie*. I sharpen this point and extend the existing literature on femininity and antitheatricity by providing an analysis of masculine fear and confusion with regards to the maternal body (and in particular its secretions), which I argue is the fleshy embodiment of a major threat to patriarchy. I then look to nineteenth-century Paris and the infamous Salpêtrière hospital for a particularly chilling example of how women’s reputation as dissemblers and the belief in their lying bodies was pathologized and institutionalized by the medical scientific field in the diagnosis of hysteria. This also provides a fascinating example of how the hysterics at the Salpêtrière became complicit co-performers, and out of necessity and self-preservation, reflected an image of the lying, theatrical beings that patriarchal culture deems women to be.

From there I move on to a major contribution of this chapter, which is to expand the notion of the lying, or deceptive body, to trans embodiment in order to demonstrate that the threat of the female body goes beyond gender essentialism to encompass any “deviant” body – that is, bodies that are not cisgendered and male. Similar to my earlier discussion of hysteria this section examines how meanings around trans bodies, and in

particular the idea of a “lying” trans body has been constituted in medical-scientific institutions, in particular in early gender dysphoria clinics in the United States.

I conclude the chapter by considering the close alignment between women and extra-rational thought. In this section I deconstruct and critique the notion of feminine intuition. I do this in part by examining it alongside discourses linking masculinity and rational thought. I also place ideas surrounding feminine intuition in conversation with Jennifer Fisher’s work on intuition and artists. Finally, I offer an anti-essentialist feminist reading of women’s supposed access to extra-rational thought and experiential knowledge.

This chapter lays important historical and theoretical groundwork for ideas that I will continue to develop throughout the rest of the dissertation. In order to fully understand the faker/authority false binary of Spiritualists and scientist debunker performances it is essential to understand how antitheatricity and unknowability have been inscribed on women’s bodies for millennia. The Spiritualist and scientist performances that I examine later in the dissertation are sites where notions of women as both seers and intuitives and dissemblers are invoked/brush up against each other. There is also a strong link between intuition and the role/work of artists that ties it to the dissertation’s consideration of performance art. I am interested in the instances where cultural ideas of women as untrustworthy *and* intuitive connect, overlap, and contradict each other. It is in this tension that the generative potential of the Borderlands lays. Therefore I conclude the chapter with a number of questions that considering these two seemingly contradictory cultural ideas about women through the lens of the Borderlands allows.

Antitheatricality, Mistrust, and the Female Body

In the Introduction to this dissertation I provided an overview of antitheatrical discourse. I now turn my attention to a possible explanation for the anti-theatrical discourse as it is applied to women in particular. To do so, I shift my focus to the female body – a move that seems appropriate given the embodied nature of performance – and argue that the idea that women are naturally dissemblers is situated in the female body itself. It is important to note that while the majority of my analysis focuses on the cisgendered female body, I do not intend for this to be an exercise in essentialism. That is to say, I do not conflate a body that displays biologically female traits or reproductive capability with what it means to be a woman, a perspective that would exclude trans women and people who are assigned female at birth. Gender identity is a far more complicated and nuanced issue than simple biology. However, it also cannot be ignored that to a large segment of the population (and in particular, according to the patriarchal ideology that I am arguing against here), what is between her legs and in her body *is* what makes a woman a woman. In an effort to move beyond this essentialism, later in this chapter I consider antitheatricality in relation to trans embodiment, which I argue is similarly subject to distrust, surveillance and regulation.

I would also like to acknowledge that my discussion of “women’s bodies” has a hint of universalism that does a disservice to the varied experiences of women, in particular racialized women. All women are affected by patriarchy, and though some physiological experiences may be shared, the implications of these embodied experiences take on different forms in different (and often intersecting) contexts, such as the relative privilege of the woman, geographic and cultural location, class, sexuality, disability, etc.

For example, Nicole R. Fleetwood notes, “seeing black is always a problem in a visual field that structures the troubling presence of blackness,” and “the black female body is always troubling to dominant visual culture” (3). This “troubling” nature means that racialized women’s bodies are subject to more surveillance and intervention than privileged white bodies; an example of this is the eugenicist projects of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that included forced sterilizations of disabled, poor, and racialized women.³⁵ In Canada, forced sterilization of Indigenous women was enshrined in law until the 1970s³⁶ and persists to this day in the form of coerced sterilization (where women are pressured by healthcare workers during labour to undergo tubal ligation – an incredibly vulnerable, and therefore inappropriate time to suggest such serious and potentially irreversible interventions)³⁷ (Collier). The section that follows should be taken as only the first step in a more complicated discussion of how patriarchy affects women’s bodies.

As I have argued, a key feature of antitheatrical discourse is a distrust of women. Calling women liars, and situating this lie in their bodies is a convenient way to entrench patriarchal ideology. Sixteenth-century writer and physician François Rabelais (an “enlightened” man) had this to say about women:

When I say woman, I mean a sex so fragile, so variable, so mutable, so inconstant and imperfect, that Nature (Speaking in all honor and reverence) seems to me to have strayed from the good sense by which she³⁸ had created and formed all things, when she built woman...I don’t know what to conclude, unless that in creating woman she had regard more to man’s social delectation and the perpetuation of the human species than to the perfection of individual femininity...For nature has placed in their body, in a secret place inside, an animal, a member, which is not in men. (qtd. In Didi-Huberman 68)

This “animal” inside is of course the uterus, one of the key biological sexual differences between men and women, and an organ, which as I will show, has confounded men

throughout history. The perspective expressed by Rabelais also gestures to the patriarchal tendency to situate the male body as a point of universal reference (and humorously, perfection), which when measured against, the female body can only be found quite literally *lacking*.

Women's bodies are confusing to men in part because of the interiority of their sex. That is, as opposed to the male sexual organs that exist on the exterior of the body (some might point out, quite vulnerably) women's biological sex is interior, and therefore invisible and mysterious. Performance theorist Della Pollock, quoting Nancy Mairs writes,

if the body is already viewed with suspicion in Western culture (it is the fleshy, irrational thing over which the mind, the 'I' that thinks, that *is* because it thinks, is expected to exert control), then the female body is 'particularly suspect, since so much of it is in fact hidden, dark, secret, carried out on the inside where, even with the aid of a speculum, one can never perceive all of it in the plain light of day, a graspable whole' (Mairs 1996:85-86). Elusive, in/visible, the female interior must also be illicit, requiring elaborate surveillance and management. Within white Western culture the black female body is double suspect: her dark exterior is taken for a sign of her interiority; it is marked *outside* of an inside receding with every gesture and black *look*. (219)

The elusive mystery of women's bodies often devolves into masculine fear, the response to which has been the desire to master through knowledge. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray's response to masculinist psychoanalytic theory, she observes,

So it would be a case of you men speaking among yourselves about woman, who cannot be involved in hearing or producing a discourse that concerns the *riddle*, the logograph she represents for you. The enigma that *is* woman will therefore constitute the *target*, the *object*, the *stake*, of a masculine discourse, of a debate among men, which would not consult her, would not concern her. Which, ultimately, she is not supposed to know anything about. (13)

Here Irigaray is specifically responding to Freud's lecture on the "problem of femininity," which, in a telling intersection of sexism, racism, and a colonizer's mindset

he famously referred to as the “dark continent.” Freud readily admitted that he did not understand women, but that did not prevent him from speaking/speculating authoritatively about them.

In classic psychoanalytic theory a fundamental way of understanding women’s sex is through the concept of mimesis. Influential critiques of mimesis go back to antiquity, and even then drew a connection between femininity and mimetic behaviour. Plato was against mimesis, insofar as he considered it representation, and therefore removed from Truth (one of the ideals of the Republic). For Plato, the arts are inferior to science and philosophy, just as objects are inferior to ideas (no word on what he would have thought about conceptual art). He believed that all art is mimetic by nature – a cheap imitation of what that art seeks to represent.

In the introduction to *Unmaking Mimesis*, feminist performance scholar Elin Diamond touches on Plato’s mirror analogy in Book X of *The Republic*. In this section Socrates teaches Plato’s interlocutor Glaucon a lesson on the inferiority of representation by giving an example of how someone could “quickly” be “the maker of all things” by simply walking around with a mirror. Diamond writes,

Here is mimetic activity in all its perniciousness. Mocking the transcendent authority of the supreme maker with his own phoney largess, this fantasy ‘craftsman,’ this pseudo- Glaucon³⁹ mocks as well the creator’s product, changing an admittedly second-order but rational nature into flickering incoherent images. The dazzling, turning mirror, grabbing and scattering particulars in its wake, upsets the vital order of objects and deprives the sun of its magisterial role as ‘offspring’ of the cosmic logos. More seriously it lures the senses of the mirror-holder (and of any passing impressionable guardian), particularly the superior optical sense, by transmitting untrue judgements about reality. (i)

Diamond makes the connection between the inferior mimesis, and the inferior woman.

She writes, “Because he acts mimetically Glaucon, for Plato, descends into ‘Glaucon,’ a

non-entity, and as such womanish, a woman. Is s/he then a woman? Or like a woman? In mimesis, remarks an anthropologist, ‘one conforms with something one is not and also should not be’ (ii). Diamond also quotes Classics scholar Froma Zeitlin, who says for the Greeks, “Woman is the mimetic creature par excellence, ever since Hesiod’s Zeus created her as an imitation with the aid of the other artisan gods and adorned her with deceptive allure...Plato considered women susceptible to illusionism and most likely to deceive” (vi).

With its connotations of imitation, representation, and mimicry, mimesis is thoroughly linked to performance and theatricality. From a psychoanalytic perspective women engage in mimesis in an attempt to imitate the more perfect (and universal) male body. This is expressed in Freud’s theory of penis envy, wherein the developing girl wants to mimic the little boy and is jealous of his penis (because with her sex being interior, she appears to have none). Many feminist critics have pointed out that only a man could have come up with a theory to explain female psycho-sexual development that places such a privilege on the penis – surely someone is obsessed, but it is probably not the little girl – and have reformulated penis envy to explain that what women actually covet is the power afforded to men in phallogocentric culture, which the phallus is but a symbol of. Playing upon the importance of mimesis, Irigaray uses it as a method and performative writing strategy. She repeats verbatim the words of various male philosophers, “miming” the texts, “as a mode of deconstructing their authority. She plays on the double meaning of miming as an act of poking fun at something and as a symptom of hysteria...to reveal the patriarchal operations of Western thought to create the whole

world, including women, in the image of men” (Hansen 203). In this context, words and ideas (such as Freud’s) are revealed to be quite ridiculous, and themselves *lacking*.

Women’s bodies are threatening to patriarchy because of their unknowability, and this especially extends to their sexuality, which is often construed as something to be feared. Not only do women not look like men, but their sexuality is quite different. Take, for example, the difference between the male and female orgasm, the former being relatively straightforward, which makes the power, force, multiplicity, and again, interiority of the latter all the more foreign. This “you are not like me, and therefore are something to be feared” mentality is expressed in the concept of castration anxiety – the male equivalent of penis envy. If Freud is to be believed, women’s different sex literally instills fear in the little boy/man who defines woman by her lack of a phallus; phallogocentrism, it would seem, is actually quite fragile.

The threat of women’s sexuality is potently symbolized in her body’s secretions; it is the unknowability of women’s sex (secret) that is emphasized by what she secretes. In her discussion of women performance artists’ explicit body performances Rebecca Schneider plays with the slippage between the terms secret/secrete. She writes of “secret(e)ing that which...symbolism secrets” (Schneider 16, see also 45, 52-53, 57, 79, 88-89, 106) evoking women’s secrets and also the secretions from their bodies. The bracketed (e) Schneider uses in her word play, delightfully, also has the visual affect of resembling a vulva – inserting women’s corporeality into language itself. Julia Kristeva also writes about secretions, noting,

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it

threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (173)

Secretions – such as vaginal discharge, cum, and menstrual blood – make women’s sex all the more secretive. Secret to whom? To men who refuse to know, and as a part of that refusal created a discourse of shame and secrecy around women’s sexuality, attempting to keep it secret even from themselves (until hopefully, that moment of women’s sexual awareness and awakening through the power of a hand-mirror, and the desire to know her own body).

If the female body is opaque and something to be feared under patriarchy, then this is especially true of the maternal body.⁴⁰ For patriarchy it is particularly inconvenient that women, being such distrustful beings, have to be trusted to a certain degree in order to produce offspring. A solution to this has been heavy male regulation of women’s reproductive lives. Extending the notion of secrecy regarding women’s bodies, there is also a pervasive and damaging cultural silence/secrecy around the maternal body – even amongst women. In recounting her project of listening to women’s birth stories Della Pollock observes, “I was dumbstruck. Other people *knew* this – what she knew, what I now knew: the terror and the secret. I had stumbled into a secret society to which, it seemed, I already belonged” (3). The maternal body is also the site of excessive secretions; despite the missed periods, the maternal body is positively *dripping* with fluids and secretions – increased vaginal discharge (leukorrhea), sweat, vomit, excess mucous and congestion, hormonal tears, frequent urination, fluid buildup in joints, amniotic fluid, colostrum and breast milk, “bloody show” and mucous plug, excess blood volume (up to fifty percent more than a pre-pregnancy body), the bleeding during, and in

the weeks following birth, and the often spectacular, torrential first post-partum period.

Apart from its slippery excess, the maternal body is the subject of patriarchal fear because of its immense strength and power. An ideology that positions men as the rightful bearers of power (and has constructed patriarchal religions and origin stories to justify this) is left weak in the face of the truth of maternal omnipotence: only women can create life. Julia Kristeva writes, “Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing” (174). Kristeva, Irigaray, and others, have gone as far as to suggest that masculine cultural production is in fact an attempt to compensate for men’s reproductive inferiority. In *Speculum of the Other Woman* Irigaray also takes Plato to task, making the implicit birth metaphors in his work explicit and resituating the maternal body in the creation of male “genius”. His famous allegorical cave becomes womb, and what is worse, based on his own conception of the illusions created therein, theatre.

Diamond writes,

With this reconfigured womb-theater, Irigaray wittily retrieves and confirms Plato’s worst fears about theater, female duplicity, and, by implication, maternity. Platonic philosophy wants to place man’s origins, not in the dark uncertain cave, but in his recognition of the (Father’s) light. The philosopher wants to forget – wants to prove illusory – his female origins. Irigaray turns that wish into a playfully anarchic scenario: philosophic man discovers that, horrifically, mother is a theater. (xi)

Mother is a theatre. A horrifying thought for the anti-theatrical, anti-mimetic, anti-woman. *Too much.*

Women’s reputation as dissemblers means that the problem of paternity is a particularly loaded one, for it must rest on the trust of women. Prior to the advent of genetic tests (in other words, for most of history) women could lie about the paternity of

their children, and barring any obvious visual resemblances, get away with it. This was the thorn in the side of patriarchy – men had to trust women to tell them who their sons were. Paternity is especially important under patriarchy, not only because it validates men’s virility and ego, but because it establishes lineage for the passing down of material possessions under capitalism. Irigaray notes that under patrilineal naming structures, the woman, whose maternity cannot be questioned, has her authority stripped, and is relegated to the role of “anonymous worker, the machine in the service of the master-proprietor who will put his trademark upon the finished product” (23).

The distrust of women surrounding pregnancy and childbirth can be seen in the ongoing political and legal battles being fought to control women’s reproductive freedoms, notably the 2022 Supreme Court overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States. One of the surest ways to maintain control of women is to control their reproduction, and this is effectively done by limiting access to education, birth control, and abortion.⁴¹ The distrust of women is also evident in the intense policing of the maternal body. For example, in North America there is a cultural belief that women cannot be trusted to take care of their own fetus. Such is the case with total prohibitions against alcohol while pregnant, rather than trusting women to be able to parse the nuance between binge drinking, and the occasional glass of wine. However, one of the greatest instances of patriarchal interference in pregnancy and birth was the nineteenth and early twentieth century establishment of obstetrics as a distinct medical specialty, which inserted male control over female reproduction.⁴² A medical field devoted solely to the care of women’s health retains to this day many problematic markings of the distrust of women and their bodies. With obstetrics, what was once the authoritative domain of

midwives and communities of women was institutionalized, and in many cases pathologized.

Performing Hysteria

Though fear and confusion over women's sexuality has existed throughout history, one of the starkest manifestations of the belief that women are natural performers and that their bodies lie – to the point of pathology – can be found in the example of Charcot's hysterics. Hysteria – a “disease” with symptoms that are normal aspects of women's sexuality – has been around since ancient Greece, and Plato's theory of a “wandering womb” responsible for all maladies that plagued women. But it was Professor Charcot, from his authoritative position as head physician at Paris' women's hospital, the Salpêtrière (Fig. 7), who revived the diagnosis in the nineteenth-century and cemented its iconic status in visual culture through the production of two volumes of the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*. The invention of hysteria is a direct manifestation of the patriarchal fear of women's bodies, and a desire to explain and control them. Georges Didi-Huberman writes, “Because hysteria represented a *great fear* for everyone, it was the *bête noire* [black beast] of physicians for a very, very long time: for it was aporia made into a symptom. It was the symptom, to put it crudely, *of being a woman*” (68).

Hysteria is very closely tied to the belief in women's innate theatricality, and here again, mimesis comes into play, “*Mimesis* is the hysterical symptom par excellence. Hysteria is considered to be ‘a whole art,’ the art and manner of ‘theatricalism,’ as is always said in psychiatry, and which no theatricality is strong enough to equal in its



Fig. 7. *Une leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière* by André Brouillet, 1887. Public domain.

swaggers” (Didi-Huberman 164). Through a complex dynamic of suggestion, reward, and punishment, the hysterics Charcot studied entered into a contract of complicity with the doctor, constantly upping the stakes in their own spectacular performances. Didi-Huberman notes, “[The hysterics] were so ‘successful’ as *subjects of mimesis* that, in the eyes of the physicians who had become the directors of their fantasies, they entirely lost their status as *subjects of distress*. This is another paradox, not as classic but so simple, of the actress” (229). The savviest of the Salpêtrière’s hysterics (such as the famed Augustine – Charcot’s favourite “starlet” and the subject of many of the images in the *Iconographie*) performed exactly what the doctors wanted to see (Fig. 8). The doctors in turn simultaneously did and did not trust the women (remember, that a symptom of



Fig. 8. Augustine performing various hysterical poses (“Attitudes Passionnelles”), photographed by Régnard circa 1876-1880. Montage by Wikimedia user Damiens.rf. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

hysteria is lying!), however, they desperately wanted to believe in the women’s performances because they would validate the men’s lifework and “genius.”

Why were the hysterics complicit in their performances that in many cases resulted in torturous “treatments” and subjugation? Their motivation can perhaps be found in the stark imbalance of power between the hysterics and Charcot and the other physicians of the Salpêtrière. The hospital was the “general hospital for women, or rather for the feminine dregs of society... female paupers, vagabonds, beggars, ‘decrepit women,’ ‘old maids,’ epileptics, ‘women in second childhood,’ ‘misshapen and malformed innocents,’ incorrigible women – madwomen” (Didi-Huberman 13). The vast divide of class, race, gender, and authority, meant that the hysterics who performed the persona that the doctors wanted and expected to see – dramatic madwomen - can be read as doing so out of self-preservation as a survival mechanism. As horrific as their lives inside the confines of the Salpêtrière would have been, it was still a place with a bed to sleep, food to eat, and the potential to gain attention and even notoriety. In her excellent book, *Hysteria in Performance* (2021), Jenn Cole notes that it was precisely Charcot’s

use of theatrical methods in his famous lectures and publication of the *Iconographie* that allowed the hysterics the opportunity to intervene in these uneven power dynamics. Cole writes,

Making use of the parameters of spectacle allowed the hysteric to challenge the power/knowledge imbalances between herself and the Salpêtrière medical community... The hysteric intervened at the level of spectacle by withholding information, by altering the course of the show, [and] by dramatizing her life in a manner that overflowed empirical style. (12)

Viewed through this lens of performance-as-potential-for-intervention the hysterics can be understood as participating in Charcot's spectacles as a way to assert agency and insert something of themselves into the performances.

There are multiple connections that can be made between "hysterics" and Spiritualists, and indeed, the two did overlap with various women in the Spiritualist movement labelled hysterics. In *Radical Spirits* Ann Braude writes about the "pathology of mediumship," and the well-known American neurologist William Alexander Hammond who "strongly associated mediumship with hysteria" and published the book *The Physics and Physiology of Spiritualism* in 1871 (158). Even when not explicitly labelled hysterics, some Victorian Spiritualists similarly faced forced incarceration. Alex Owen opens her book *The Darkened Room* with the story of Mrs. Louisa Lowe, who in 1877 gave evidence before England's Parliamentary Select Committee on lunacy, and claimed that her husband had used her "unusual religious views" as grounds to commit her to an asylum (i).

The hysterics of the Salpêtrière eventually revolted, refusing to perform any longer and thus outgrew their usefulness (Didi-Huberman 261-62). However the legacy of Charcot's work would stretch far into the twentieth century, in particular through the

work of one of his students – none other than Sigmund Freud. In developing his theory of psychoanalysis Freud would lay the groundwork for nearly a century of (mis)understanding women’s psychological and sexual experiences, and canonize the concept that the basis of women’s lie can be traced back to childhood, and the female body. As I have shown, feminist psychoanalytic theorists such as Kristeva and Irigaray have devoted much of their work to correcting this wrong by offering their own interpretation and embodied knowledge, in particular salvaging the role of the maternal body.

The “Lying” Trans Body

If, as I have argued, women’s status as dissemblers can be traced to their biological difference, how can we think about this in relation to trans bodies? A consideration of trans embodiment is important to any effort to think through gendered modes of difference. In the context of this dissertation it is especially important because trans lived experiences – existing as they sometimes do in the contested borderlands of gender – trouble the binary distinction of women/men upon which patriarchal modes of thought are based. For example, ascribing particular qualities to one gender or another (i.e. women are hysterical dissemblers, men are rational and therefore trustworthy) is complicated by the fact that people can, and do, transition genders. This lays bare the problems of gender essentialism – how can gendered qualities be an essential part of one’s being if the boundaries of gender are in fact permeable? By arguing, as I do below, that trans bodies are subject to similar accusations of fraud that cisgendered women are, I

provide an example of how non-normative bodies are feminized in service of their devaluation.

Taking trans experience into account is not only a humanist endeavour but also a feminist one. As Trans Studies scholar Emma Heaney notes in her introduction to the anthology *Feminism Against Cisness* (2024), “*Cisness is feminism’s counterrevolution.*” She explains, “Because cisness ontologizes sex as a binary of bodily forms, it orients feminism away from a revolution in the hierarchy or values that would overturn, for instance, the priority of accumulation over reproduction and domination over care toward female emancipation as an individual affair” (1). The cultural baggage attached to women’s bodies that I have explored so far in this chapter also affects trans bodies. Trans-masculine and non-binary people who were assigned female at birth and have forgone bottom surgery (a common experience) navigate the world, and significantly the medical system, with vaginas and uteri.⁴³ Depending on the degree to which they “pass” they might very well still be treated as a woman in public, intentionally misgendered as an act of violence or intimidation, or punished because of their gender non-conformity. Trans-feminine and trans women are subject to extreme misogyny and violence if they are perceived as being trans (i.e. not passing). The justifications for this range from the expected hatred – women are contemptible, it is horrific that anyone would “choose”⁴⁴ to be one – to the illogically protectionist rhetoric of TERFism (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism) which states that trans women’s claim to womanhood somehow invalidates the lived experience of cisgendered women. For trans women who are able to pass, their gender euphoria is no doubt complicated by the misogyny they are subject to.⁴⁵

Transphobic rhetoric is rooted in an inability (or unwillingness) to see beyond the biological markers of sex, and a less-than sophisticated understanding of the difference between sex and gender. The supposedly logical argument that follows from this is that trans people are lying about their corporeal experience. As mainstream awareness of trans identity has increased over the past decade, examples of these types of arguments have become widespread and commonplace. They are debated at length everywhere from school board meetings, to cable news, to *The New York Times* and have made strange, dystopian bedfellows with far-right conservatives and TERFS. As C. Heike Schotten notes, “Widely imagined (or hoped) to be a political perspective that would die off with its progenitors, 1970s American and British radical and lesbian feminists, TERFism has found new allies in right-wing catholic and Evangelical researchers, scholars, activists, and figureheads, reinventing itself as “gender critical” feminism that casts doubt on “gender ideology” (Greenesmith 2020a; Martínez and Rojas 2021)” (334).

Rarely are trans people involved in mainstream conversations surrounding trans “issues”, or called on for their expertise in the matter. In early 2023 nearly 200 *New York Times* contributors signed an open letter that criticized what they deemed to be inaccurate and biased reporting on issues of gender diversity by the paper, that the signatories identified as having an, “eerily familiar mix of pseudoscience and euphemistic, charged language” (nytletter.com). Coverage of trans and gender non-conforming youth was identified as particularly problematic with, “over 15,000 words of front-page *Times* coverage debating the propriety of medical care for trans children published in the last eight months alone” (nytletter.com). The belief that trans people are lying about their bodies, or confused about them, is expressed in the hand wringing over young

people accessing gender confirming care like puberty blockers. This distrust is also at the root of the questioning of gender non-conforming people when they use a bathroom that does not appear to align with their gender expression, and the effort to ban trans women from competing in women's sports. The bathroom issue in particular is a flashpoint for anti-trans discourse.⁴⁶ Transphobes argue that it must be assumed that a gender non-conforming person is entering a bathroom for nefarious reasons, thus assigning them predatory motives that are reminiscent of stereotypes and arguments against homosexuality. In the Introduction to *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam notes that, "whereas men's rest rooms tend to operate as highly charged sexual space in which sexual interactions are both encouraged and punished, women's rest rooms tend to operate as an arena for the enforcement of gender conformity" (24). This tracks with the prevalence of female voices in anti-trans rhetoric. Cisgendered women are the foot soldiers of the patriarchy. That is, they are its most effective messengers and enablers. My sense is that the transphobia some cisgendered women espouse is a complicated and paradoxical expression of their desire to adhere to patriarchal scripts, combined with their, rightful, pain⁴⁷ over their own subjugation. The obvious irony is that trans women are not the enemy here.

Sandy Stone's "The "Empire" Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," first published in 1987, is regarded as a foundational text of Trans Studies. In it she provides a critical history of "epistemologies of white male medical practice, the rage of radical feminist theories and the chaos of lived experience meeting on the battlefield of the transsexual body: a hotly contested site of cultural inscription, a meaning machine for the production of ideal type" (Stone 11). Stone's essay explores some of the complex ways in

which trans people (her focus here is on trans women) are framed as dissemblers by both the medical establishment and TERFs. She also provides a nuanced discussion of how trans women seeking gender affirming care have been implicated in performances of inauthenticity – that is, they have lied to doctors about their own bodily experience – in order to get what they need from them: surgery.

Much of Stone's essay is framed as a counter-discourse to the virulent transphobic attacks of second wave TERF academic writing. The title of her essay itself is a response to the title of Janice Raymond's 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (and in the essay's Acknowledgements Stone cheekily thanks Raymond "for playing Luke Skywalker to my Darth Vader" (15)). Amongst other vitriolic attacks in *Empire*, Raymond writes: "Rape...is a masculinist violation of bodily integrity. All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves...Rape, although it is usually done by force, can also be accomplished by deception" (qtd. in Stone 3). Here Raymond explicitly frames transgender experience as a lie. What is more, it is framed as an insidious lie aimed at causing metaphorical phallic violence to cis women's bodily integrity, and perhaps ontology. Stone states that, "though *Empire* represented a specific moment in feminist analysis and prefigured the appropriation of liberal political language by a radical right, here in 1991, on the twelfth anniversary of its publication, it is still the definitive statement on transsexualism by a genetic female academic" (3).

Despite being well into the age of Trans Studies, an exciting and dynamic field that Stone's essay helped usher in, thirty years later this rhetoric is unfortunately still very much being espoused by TERF academics, particularly in the UK. These, for the most

part white, cisgender, and of-a-certain-age women have attempted to shed the “exclusionary” title and have rebranded as “gender critical” feminists. Though not an academic, the “gender critical” feminist with undoubtedly the largest platform and reach is Joanne Kathleen Rowling, who has ceased publishing fanciful books about wizardry for children and now seems to devote the majority of her time to attacking trans women on the Internet. This strikes many as a pretty obvious case of punching down (billionaire author with a fan base in the hundreds of millions worldwide rage-tweets from her 17th century Scottish estate). And yet, despite a vocal critique of Rowling’s words and ideology, many have defended her. In “J.K. Rowling and the Echo Chamber of Secrets” trans scholar Gina Gwenffrewi deconstructs how in the wake of the publication of Rowling’s 2020 essay “TERF Wars,” the legacy media in Scotland framed Rowling as a victim of aggressive and/or delusional attacks by trans women. Speaking of legacy media – the *day* after the publication of the aforementioned open letter to the *New York Times* the paper published an op-ed by noted contrarian⁴⁸ Pamela Paul titled, “In Defense of J.K. Rowling”.

Earlier in this chapter I brought together historical and theoretical accounts to demonstrate that the association between women and theatricality frames how they are viewed and/or treated as deceitful by the white, male hegemonic Western medical establishment. Stone’s essay traces a genealogy of trans people’s interactions with this same medical establishment, looking at early gender dysphoria clinics, in particular the Stanford Gender Dysphoria Program, which was founded in 1968, and the locus of clinical academic gender research. In the context of these spaces doctors, researchers and patients came together, often uncomfortably, to imagine new possibilities for bodies,

identity, and medical/scientific understanding. Stone writes, “The origin of the gender dysphoria clinics is a microcosmic look at the construction of criteria for gender. The foundational idea for the gender dysphoria clinics was first, to study an interesting and potentially fundable human aberration; second, to provide help, as they understood the term, for a ‘correctable problem’” (8). I would add that the origin of the clinics also provides a look at how, from the beginning, the Western medical apparatus framed trans bodies as not to be trusted, and in particular, trans people’s lived experience as questionable.

Though, as Stone notes, some early non-academic gender dysphoria clinics performed surgery “on demand”—that is, taking the prospective patients at their word—within the medical-academic establishment at the Stanford there was a need to develop a quantifiable, objective, repeatable diagnostic criteria. To do otherwise would incur “professional risks involved in performing experimental surgery on ‘sociopaths’” (Stone 8). Early clinical studies were riddled with methodological error and limited in use due to their small sample sizes, however this did not prevent them from being used and cited. However, this limited and flawed data, and the desire for a diagnostic criteria more concrete than the feeling of being in the “wrong body” set the researchers up for comic failure, and the production of even more flawed data. Prospective sex-reassignment patients knew that, on the one hand, their doctors would not take them at their word, and on the other hand, there was a handy script that—should they perform it—that would allow them to get their surgery. Stone explains:

Initially, the only textbook on the subject of transsexualism was Harry Benjamin's definitive work *The Transsexual Phenomenon* [1966]...When the first clinics were constituted, Benjamin's book was the researchers' standard reference. And when the first transsexuals were evaluated for their suitability for surgery, their

behavior matched up gratifyingly with Benjamin's criteria. The researchers produced papers which reported on this, and which were used as bases for funding. It took a surprisingly long time--several years--for the researchers to realize that the reason the candidates' behavioral profiles matched Benjamin's so well was that the candidates, too, had read Benjamin's book, which was passed from hand to hand within the transsexual community. (9)

This co-constitution of discourse and meaning between the patients and the clinicians echoes the co-performances of Charcot and his patients at the Salpêtrière. In both instances the patients, from a position of considerably lesser power, perform what they interpret to be the expectations of the physicians and scientists as a means to an end. This in turn justifies the medical establishment's entrenched views by providing them with clinical "evidence."

This example from the Stanford clinic also created situations in which the trans patients felt they not only needed to mimic the textual accounts of Benjamin, but also needed to actively lie about their corporeal experience, in particular as it related to pleasure, in order to access gender affirming care. Stone points out: "Benjamin's subjects did not talk about any erotic sense of their own bodies. Consequently nobody else who came to the clinics did either" (Stone 9). To admit to, or acknowledge any pleasure from penile masturbation would endanger these trans women's chances at accessing gender-affirming care, not least of all because it was outside of the bounds of the medical establishment's narrow views regarding gender norms and sexuality.

When considering the "lying" trans body, the only lie to be found is that anti-trans conversations are entered into with anything resembling good faith, rather than being part of larger, intersecting far-right agendas. In their recent book on the subject Judith Butler identifies that gender "has become a phantasm with destructive powers, one way of

collecting and escalating multitudes of modern panics” on the political Right (5). They also cheekily (and rightfully) note that, “To say the least, lexical debates about gender are not exactly followed by those who now oppose the term [as a monolith]” (Butler 4). The body is incapable of lying – to assert so is to project morality onto the physical self. And yet, it is impossible to understand the body, and what it is “telling” us outside of a social framework. What we understand a body to “be” is often rooted in essentialist understandings. It has long been the project of various intersecting modes of power – religion, patriarchy, science and colonialism to name but a few – to project morality onto certain bodies, thereby ensuring their continued power. Here I cede the last word in a section on trans embodiment to a trans woman:

Bodies are screens on which we see projected the momentary settlements that emerge from ongoing struggles over beliefs and practices within the academic and medical communities. These struggles play themselves out in arenas far removed from the body. Each is an attempt to gain a high ground which is profoundly moral in character, to make an authoritative and final explanation for the way things are and consequently for the way they must continue to be. In other words, each of these accounts is culture speaking with the voice of an individual.
(Stone 11)

Women and Intuition

As I have demonstrated, in Western discourse there is a strong historical and cultural alignment between antitheatricality and the idea that women should not be trusted. I have shown that what I am calling the masculine fear and confusion over female embodiment is rooted in a patriarchal distrust of women’s bodies. I have also extended that argument to trans bodies, deconstructing how medical-scientific regimes, typified by early (mid-twentieth-century) gender dysphoria clinics have contributed to the understanding that trans bodies lie. I now shift my attention to the tension between the

ideas that women are dissemblers, yet are also naturally intuitive and possess a privileged access to the extra-rational or unknown.

There is an obvious paradox, or tension between the framing of women as simultaneously theatrical and not to be trusted, and at the same time intuitive beings with special access to the extra-rational. There is, however, a parallel between the ideas, which is that both are rooted in essentialist understandings of womanhood. Just as I have demonstrated earlier in the chapter that women's theatricality and thus untrustworthiness are rooted in the body, so too can intuition be understood as an embodied practice. There are hints of a Cartesian mind/body divide in what is often referred to as a "gut feeling". This language takes what is a cognitive process and situates it lower down in the body; it is something that is *felt* rather than *thought*. It should be no surprise then, that something so strongly associated with embodiment and emotion is gendered female. The problem with claiming intuition as feminine is that it is based on a binary understanding, and in many cases conflation, of sex and gender. This oversimplification also fails to take other important intersecting factors, such as race, into account. Tying intuitive ability to women also reinforces reductive alignments between women and nature insofar as intuition is related to women having a more "natural" connection to the environment (or in the parlance of many new-age movements and beliefs, "the universe" – an amorphous notion of agentic forces beyond one's reach).

The existence of the phrase "feminine intuition"⁴⁹ and its lack of a corollary in "masculine intuition" is perhaps the clearest example of how strongly aligned intuition and femininity are. There may be examples of supposed male intuition – such as the ancient Greek writers who claimed connections to Daemons – but even in these cases

intuition is not claimed *as* masculine, per se. If there is a dearth of examples of masculine intuition it is because male cognition or insight is rarely framed in these terms. Under Western patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity is much more closely aligned with rational versus intuitive thought despite both being elements of the complex and little understood process of cognition. As Gerd Gigerenzer explains in his chapter “Female Intuition Versus Male Reason: The Battle for Intelligence” these alignment of men with rational thought and women with intuition originated over the course of thousands of years by men who were intent on justifying their superior social position.⁵⁰

The lack of discourse surrounding masculine intuition points to the fact that when your ideas, words, and actions hold real-world power, you do not need to appeal to intuition in order to justify your position. Taken this way, the recourse to frame oneself as intuitive could speak to the need for women, under patriarchy, to seek and demonstrate extra authority. This begs the question: what are, or have been, accepted areas of female intuition if, as I have demonstrated earlier in the chapter, women are not to be trusted about their own bodies? An obvious answer to this question given the essentialist framing of intuition could be motherhood. However, this is complicated: patriarchal motherhood is framed as both instinctual and natural meaning women are expected to intuitively know what to do and how to do it. And yet in order to be considered a “good” mother under patriarchal motherhood women are expected to seek the outside advice of “experts” (often male), thereby being given the contradictory message to not trust their gut.⁵¹

Art is an area rich in positive associations with intuition. Artists have long been assumed to have a privileged access to something extra rational, and within that context have taken on the role of “medium” or interpreter. During the Middle Ages and the

Renaissance this was understood in religious terms: artists were seen as conduits for the divine, channelling God through their bodies and into their work. It is worth noting, though, that there is not equity assigned to intuition for women and men engaged in the arts. When male artists are acting as conduits for divine inspiration they are considered to be geniuses; when women artists have claimed the same, they have often been labelled hysterics. More contemporary expressions of the idea cast artists as possessing a particular access to the unconscious. In her anthology on the subject, *Technologies of Intuition* (2006), Jennifer Fisher notes that artists commonly invoke intuition as a methodology, locus of inspiration, and way of making sense of their acts of creation. Fisher claims that, while commonly used by artists, the term, “has been marginalized within art theory and criticism,” a gap that is filled by her book.⁵² She defines intuition as “whether sensed as a gut feeling or a flash of insight...central to processes of ‘coming to know’ in aesthetic practice and experience” (Fisher 11). To return then to the question of “acceptable” spaces and contexts for women to claim intuitive ability, it would seem that art is one.

The embodied knowledge of intuition may be of particular relevance to performers and performance artists wherein their bodies are configured as medium/medium: the physical medium of the work and also the medium through which they channel intuitive knowledge. In her piece “On Intuition” Carolee Schneemann writes, “In my work, transformation comes through recognitions of the body – the body is a bridge to equivalencies, connections – an alert” (92). Artists are also particularly well positioned to explore the inherent tension that I have identified in the concept of intuition. Art being a space of exploration, experimentation, and play as well as a place to combine

theory and practice makes it an ideal realm to trouble/question intuition. Barbara Balfour mines this tension in her poem “Belly Brain” wherein she writes,

When
I had my natal chart interpreted, it said
that I have good instincts which I don't trust.
Where does that leave the superstitious skeptic? Rationalizing my intuition? Part of me
knows that my gut feelings tend to be right, but my
logical side
often wins the argument. Maybe the Cartesian dilemma
lives on in my body, with
viscera primed for prophecy
and the cerebral cortex in preemptive mode.
I've taken heart recently
with research into the belly brain,
a sentient presence
that might account for the conflict within.
Found in the digestive tract,
this second brain is
an enteric nervous system made up of one hundred billion nerve cells.
Thousands of interconnected nerve fibres produce
a body loop
between the brain in one's head
and
the brain in one's belly.
This could be
what's behind the thinking woman's instincts.
Butterflies in my stomach?
Anxiety disorder?
Navel gazing?
Intuition?

It's the belly brain.
This I know to be true.
I can feel it. (116)

Balfour's poem does what poetry can and rationalist explanation cannot – it explores this tension in all of its complexity and leaves it there without the need to reach a definitive conclusion. It is enough to *feel* and through feeling, to *know*.

I would like to suggest that the tension between conceptions of women as simultaneously dissemblers *and* intuitives holds generative potential for both artists and scholars. For example, if, as I have identified, the associations of women with deceit and intuition are both rooted in essentialism, what are the potentials for strategic essentialism to be deployed as an act of resistance? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this as a political methodology? And if, as I have suggested, intuition can be read as an embodied practice of various subjugated groups that is expressed via a heightened bodily awareness in relation to one's surroundings, what can viewing this through various intersectional lenses open up (for example, crip intuition, informed by disabled embodiment)? And how might performance be a medium particularly suited for these explorations?

Conclusion

The lens of Performance Studies, a discipline that considers performance both “on stage” and in the realms of everyday life, can trouble the understanding of “authenticity” upon which the suspect nature of performance is founded, as can the issues and questions raised in the work of performance artists. These in turn lead to a fruitful perspective from

which to question and critique the belief that women are naturally dissemblers. This erroneous belief, deeply ingrained in culture – as is much of patriarchal ideology – is not only hurtful to women, but also dangerous. A culture that believes that women are by nature deceitful and cannot be trusted is one where women are not safe, do not have any authority in discourse, and strengthens the perceived divide between men and women, wherein sexual difference deems women to be *less than*.

Beyond micro level discussions of antitheatricity, some of which I have touched upon in this chapter, there are larger political implications to women not being taken seriously and the belief that a woman's word cannot be trusted. This discourse of women-as-dissemblers underlies the practices of victim blaming, and the all too common refusal to believe female survivors of rape, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence. This observation was at the crux of the #MeToo movement that began in late 2017. Facilitated by the connectivity of the Internet, large numbers of women made public the knowledge that has always existed in whisper networks, making it clear how widespread – some might say universal – this experience is. Unfortunately, though perhaps unsurprisingly, the collective noise of these revelations did not meaningfully shift the tide of patriarchal rape culture. #MeToo did not effect lasting systemic change, and powerful men who faced consequences at the time (such as comedian Louis C.K. and New York state politician – and recent NYC mayoral candidate – Andrew M. Cuomo) have strategically re-entered public life in the intervening years with seemingly little to no impact to their careers.⁵³ The movement also exposed powerful pre-existing rifts within feminist activist movement(s), for example, how it focused on the experiences of (relatively) privileged white women, and failed to address or account for the experiences of marginalized

groups.⁵⁴ The rebuke to many women who took a risk in publicly acknowledging, and in some cases naming, their perpetrators was literally ancient misogyny: they were written off as hysterics. In a world where men are deemed more worthy of trust and respect, the benefit of the doubt is often given to male assailants – in particular when he is a husband, boyfriend or beloved public figure and deemed “respectable” (read: white, educated, middle class, well-coiffed, etc.).

A particularly insidious example of the persistent cultural belief that women are known for exaggerating or faking, and of men telling women how they should really think or feel, can be found within the realm of medicine. Take, for example, the common experiences of women who suffer from excruciating menstrual conditions such as endometriosis, being told by male OB-GYNs that acetaminophen is sufficient to manage their pain – after all, it cannot be that bad. The belief that women cannot be trusted – to even know their own bodies – results in men feeling entitled to “mansplain” female experience (the term coined by feminist writer Rebecca Solnit in her 2014 essay collection *Men Explain Things to Me* to explain the familiar phenomenon of men condescendingly “educating” women on things they already know). This is exacerbated by racism. To take but one example, Black women have been plagued by centuries of racial bias in Western medicine that can be traced to the eighteenth and nineteenth century colonial project of racial “science.” In her article on race, gender, and pain, Miriam Rich quotes the American physician Edward Bancroft’s 1769 account of Guianese women in childbirth where he recorded, “A difficult or painful birth is scarce ever known...the women suffer so little, that they seem to have been exempted from the sentence of bringing forth in sorrow, which was pronounced on Eve, and is inflicted on

all the females of civilised countries” (57). Rich traces this form of travelogue even farther back to the ancient Greeks and Egyptians – the commonality being the way in which outsiders were simultaneously exoticized and dehumanized in the excising of pain from their lived experience. Troublingly, though not surprisingly given the white supremacist project of “civilization,” these colonial travel accounts were increasingly taken up by nineteenth century physicians and became entrenched as medical knowledge with the entire powers attendant thereon. The results of this have been devastating. This scientific and medical “knowledge” would go on to be used in the establishment and justification of, “chattel slavery; gynaecologic and obstetric care; medical experimentation; antiabortion crusades invoking the spectre of ‘race suicide’; and eugenic projects” (Rich 59).

In this chapter I have also put ideas about women and antitheatricality into conversation with perceptions of women’s intuition, from which a tension emerges. I have identified, exposed, and reconceptualised this tension as generative. In the section on women and antitheatricality I identified a misogynist fear and confusion over the female (and trans) body. Insofar as it is associated with essentialist formulations of gender, is women’s supposed intuition in fact just an additional reason for fear and confusion?; a tactic of othering?; or a site rich in potential for intervention and perhaps agency? For example, as various scholars have noted (Braude, Owen, Lehman, and Fisher amongst others) Spiritualism, and its attendant emphasis on both the theatricality and intuition of women, gave female mediums access to an (admittedly limited) agency that they may not have otherwise enjoyed at the time: large captive audiences who looked

to them as authorities and guides. At the same time, it put them in the position to be critiqued and challenged by scientist debunkers.

The ideas that I have put forth in this chapter set the stage, so to speak, for the rest of this dissertation. Casting an eye forward to the rest of the dissertation: an understanding of antitheatrical bias, in particular as it relates to women and manifests as a distrust of female bodies, is important for my analysis of Spiritualist/scientist encounters and conflicts. In the following chapter I build on my arguments surrounding women, antitheatricality and deceit, by providing an in-depth analysis of one of the discourses these ideas are formed in relation to. If women have, and to a large degree continue to be, considered inherently deceitful and theatrical, men have historically been framed as the opposite/antidote to that. The discipline where this idea finds currency and expression is science, and in particular the figure of the scientist, which since the professionalization of science in the late nineteenth century, has been gendered masculine. In chapter two I look to the history of science to understand how scientific authority and knowledge production are imbricated with ideas of masculinity, and further trouble the theatrical/female antitheatrical/male binary by examining how scientists themselves engage in performative practices.

Unease of the Borderlands

The Borderlands, mysterious and uncanny as they are, invite an understandable unease. There can be a discomfort – or outright rejection – of that which refuses simple categorization or adherence to a binary. The Borderlands are undeniably queer; this registers with some as a threat. One of the ways in which this fear is dealt with is through a strong adherence to a materialist belief in certainties: the need for truth, evidence, and knowledge (which more often than not fit neatly within epistemologies that are aligned with power). The flipside of curiosity can be the fear of not knowing, and there is comfort to be found in assuredness.

Enter into this unease of the unknown: those who claim an ability to provide facts and specifics with confidence – the authority figure, the expert, the guide, the scientist. There is undeniable colonial logic to the desire to name something, to know it, to master it, to own it, to categorize, contain, and control. People are drawn to those who have stared down the unknown and emerged on the other side with the promise of answers. The certainty of knowledge fundamentally relies on the rejection of other theories, other ways of seeing and experiencing the world. To prove something right one must inevitably prove something else wrong. Into this framework fits the dynamic of belief/disbelief. Disbelief in something is often the driving force behind the desire for proof and the certainty of knowledge. Belief, in its purest form, by definition does not need proof. The certainty of both belief and disbelief exist outside of the Borderlands – a place that in its complexity provides no certitude.

Chapter 2

Scientists Performing: John Tyndall, Debunker Discourse, and The Construction of Scientific Authority in the Nineteenth Century

Introduction

Having established the linkages between women, theatricality, and deceit, I now turn my attention to one of the discourses against which these ideas are forged. The counterpart to the formulation of women as dissemblers and naturally performative is the idea that men are somehow inherently trustworthy and therefore natural authority figures. A foundational element of the patriarchal lie is that men are less emotional (or at least capable of suppressing those emotions in favour of logic and reason) and therefore the rightful leaders of the family, the nation, culture, etc. For the purposes of my study I am interested in how this dynamic played out in the domain of scientific authority and knowledge production during the latter half of the nineteenth century when science was undergoing the process of professionalization.

Science, as it came to be defined in the Victorian period, and in many ways as it continues to exist in both practice and the popular imagination today, is largely the domain of men. The various ways in which scientific authority was constructed in the nineteenth century as a masculine endeavour⁵⁵ has had lasting implications that reverberate well into the twenty-first. Ideas about the “natural” division of the sexes⁵⁶ have been used to justify the exclusion of women from institutions of higher education, scientific societies, and laboratories. And yet, the conclusions drawn by Victorian “men of science,” such as Charles Darwin, Michael Faraday, Thomas Henry Huxley, and John Tyndall, have far more to do with the inherently (and paradoxically) vulnerable state of

masculinity than they do with whatever ideas about women they sought in their study of nature. As Evelyn Fox Keller notes in her ground breaking work *Reflections on Gender and Science*,

if women are made rather than born, then surely the same is true of men. It is also true of science...Both gender and science are socially constructed categories. Science is the name we give to a set of practices and a body of knowledge delineated by a community, not simply defined by the exigencies of logical proof and experimental verification. (3-4)

In order to complicate the reductive binaries of women/dissemblers and men/trustworthy I use a performance studies lens to show that during the professionalization of science in the latter half of the nineteenth century and continuing to the present, scientists have engaged in performative strategies and theatrical spectacle in their scientific demonstrations, and masculine self-fashioning. In particular, I bring a new perspective to previous studies of science and performance by analysing and defining debunker performances as they relate to Spiritualism. In doing so I demonstrate how gender, class, and education are wielded against supposed opponents of science (or accepted scientific theories) with the goal of discrediting competing belief systems. The theatricality of debunker performances not only stands in opposition to the purported objectivity and disinterestedness of the discipline but, as scholars such as Iwan Rhys Morus have argued,⁵⁷ is an essential component of how scientific authority is constructed, established, maintained and communicated.

Late nineteenth century scientists, in particular the group known as the Scientific Naturalists, may have been primed for, or at least comfortable with this contentious form of discourse because of other contemporary conflicts with both internal and external “threats” to science. One such threat was Natural Theology,⁵⁸ a field of study that sought

to understand and prove God’s existence through the observation and analysis of nature. I provide context for my debunker argument by explaining how in England during the second half of the nineteenth century the professionalization of science accompanied a transfer of authority from the “gentlemen of science” (the Anglican Oxbridge set)⁵⁹ to the “men of science” (Fig. 9) represented by the new generation of Scientific Naturalists. They believed in a separation between religion and theology and attempted to explain the natural world through means other than the supernatural.

The distinction, here, between religion and theology is subtle, but important.⁶⁰ Science and religion (as it was defined by the Scientific Naturalists) – though separate – were in harmony. For his part Tyndall believed that *true* religion was, in fact, reconcilable to science. Influenced by German Romanticism, Tyndall’s religious feelings were based upon the emotions that were stirred in him, primarily in response to nature (as



Fig. 9. “Scientists” published by Hughes & Edmonds, 1876. © National Portrait Gallery, London. Reproduced with permission.

demonstrated in his writings about the Alps). The problem, then, that the Scientific Naturalists had with theology was the way in which it attempted to take religious feelings and warp them into dogma that interfered with scientific inquiry.

Though ostensibly representative of a seismic shift from a theistic to a secular power, as Evelleen Richards has argued, this was in fact a transfer of masculine authority from one relatively small hegemonic group to another, and in that sense, a continuation of the status quo. The Victorian era was one of stringent and essentialist gender roles; a time of literal boys clubs in the form of scientific Societies that refused entry to women.⁶¹ And yet, masculinity – fragile as it is – was under threat. Movements for women’s rights, children’s rights, worker’s rights, and abolition threatened the privileged place of the white, heterosexual, cisgendered, middle-class, and European male. In the face of existential threats to masculinity, and against the backdrop of needing to distance themselves from religion, came the aggressive public performances of the Scientific Naturalists. Their scientific texts reified gender essentialism, with all qualities inscribed as male (such as objectivity, reason, and imagination) corresponding to what supposedly made a good scientist. In this sense, the philosophical assumptions underpinning the very discipline of science are bound up with problematic gendered assumptions. Women were systemically excluded from science because of their sex, in spite of their ancient roles as healers, herbalists, and midwives.

As Cynthia Russett has argued, the irony of the science devoted to the “woman problem”⁶² – laden with preconceived and prejudiced notions as it was – is that it went against the very scientific credo the Scientific Naturalists so passionately (and sometimes polemically) espoused. The fields of biology (which combined what was previously the

domain of physiology and descriptive natural history), anthropology, and psychology were particularly significant to science devoted to gathering empirical data – and extrapolating meaning – on the division of the sexes. In the latter half of the nineteenth century the concept of evolution permeated the natural and social sciences and gave new meaning to the insights that allowed scientists to rank humans on a scale of physical perfection (Russett 4). Charles Darwin⁶³ addressed the “woman problem” in his 1871 book *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, where he claimed, “Man is more powerful in body and mind than woman, and in the savage state he keeps her in a far more abject state of bondage, than does the male of any other animal; therefore it is not surprising that he should have gained the power of selection” (597). Observations from physics were also mapped onto the female body, most notably the First Law of Thermodynamics (also known as the conservation of energy), which observes that energy can be neither created nor destroyed. Scientists like Edward Clarke, in his 1873 work *Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for the Girls* extrapolated that the energy female bodies use in the development and maintenance of their complex reproductive systems meant there was not enough energy left over for intellectual pursuit. For a woman to prioritize education, especially during the intense period of adolescent sexual development, would be a misdirection of that bodily energy, with clear moral implications given that the supposed “natural” role of women was to reproduce.

Against the backdrop of a science that problematized women, I am interested in the heroic masculine self-imaging of the newly emerged professional scientist. In this chapter I explore how these men performed their masculinity – whether in the rugged pursuit of conquering mountains, or putting nature, the church, their detractors, and

Spiritualists in their place. Nineteenth century scientist's positions of authority within Victorian culture, and the work they created and championed have had far-reaching implications. A masculinist science with the authority to speak to social matters resulted in nothing less than the conflation of patriarchy and Natural Law.

The figure that animates the case studies of this chapter is John Tyndall (1820-1893), the famed Scientific Naturalist who is emblematic of the figure of the scientist in the late nineteenth century (Fig. 10). Tyndall, born in Leighlinbridge, Ireland and obtained his PhD in science from the University of Marburg in Germany⁶⁴ was an Anglo-Irish physicist and chemist who rose to scientific prominence in the 1850s with his work on diamagnetism (the property of materials that are repelled by a magnetic field, such as water, wood, copper, and gold) and made significant contributions in the study of radiant heat and glaciology. He was among the first to articulate the concept of the greenhouse effect, which is a fundamental part of climate science. Tyndall became known in Britain and beyond as an evangelist for the new Scientific Naturalism, which aimed to separate science from theology. Scientific Naturalists subscribed to the view that nature, and the physical universe are all that exist, and operate according to natural laws (such as the law of gravity), which can be understood through empirical observation and scientific inquiry. According to this credo, everything in the natural world can be explained by science, as opposed to the supernatural.

Tyndall was a prolific experimenter, lecturer, and writer, who placed a particular focus and importance on fostering a public interest in science, and providing scientific education for the lay public. His scientific and popular science writing was read widely

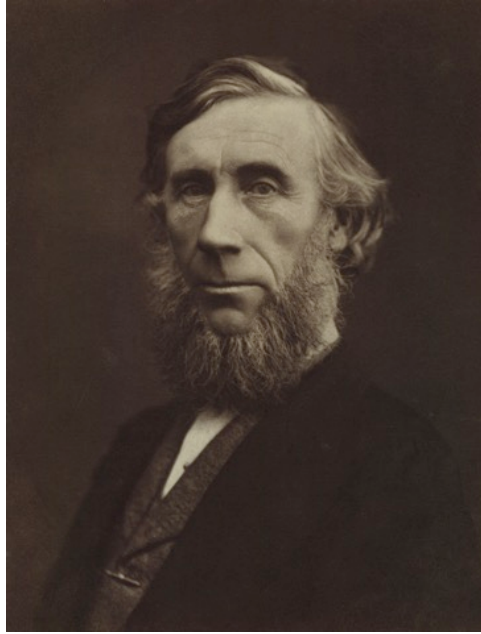


Fig. 10. John Tyndall by Lock & Whitfield, circa 1877 or before. © National Portrait Gallery, London. Reproduced with permission.

throughout the British Empire and Europe, and in 1872-1873 he undertook a well-received lecture tour of the United States where he was already a well known figure. He also became the director of the Royal Institution, one of the most important scientific institutions in the period, which provided him with a platform for his lecturing. I use Tyndall to breathe life into the ideas in this chapter for a number of reasons. First, he was an essential figure in establishing public perceptions around the role of the scientist – the reverberations of which can be felt in many examples of contemporary scientific performance. Secondly, his high public profile and the plethora of published material both by and about him make him an excellent figure to read through the lens of celebrity culture. How did Tyndall perform the public role of scientist? And how were those performances taken up in popular reporting at the time, contributing to an aura of celebrity? How did Tyndall perform his masculinity, or as I will argue, hypermasculinity? Finally, Tyndall briefly engaged with Spiritualism in the late 1860s, in what by all

accounts seems to have been a genuine attempt to study its veracity. He ultimately left the séance a skeptic – how did he perform the role of debunker?

I begin the chapter by providing context and background information about science in Britain during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and in particular the ways in which it was inextricably bound up with masculinity. I draw from feminist historians of science Cynthia Eagle Russett and Evelleen Richards, whose important works contextualize women in relation to nineteenth century science. Russett's *Sexual Science* and Richards' *Darwin and the Descent of Woman* are studies of how the male Victorian scientist's knowledge production was in many ways driven by the desire to situate their pre-existing biases in natural law. Many of the scientific "discoveries" of this era were designed to prove the inferiority of women, as well as racialized people and "lesser" men, and to place them on an evolutionary rung lower than that occupied by the "great men" of science themselves. I contextualize this framing against the professionalization of science and the emergence of the Scientific Naturalists – a group who argued for the separation of religion and science, driving scientific debate in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and shaping the image of the professional, intellectual, and authoritative scientist that persists to this day. I also analyze the correlation between Victorian science and masculinity, building on the work by J.A. Mangan and James Walvin, Erica Milam and Robert A. Nye, and Roberta Park. I then extend the work of Michael S. Reidy who has written about the heroic self-fashioning of Tyndall, who performed hypermasculinity as a mountain climber. I apply a queer feminist lens to a deconstruction and critique of these performances in order to grapple with how their ideology rationalized existing social norms, and to illuminate the

misogyny underlying them. In my deconstruction of Tyndall, the mountaineer, the mountains are both a site where the famed nineteenth-century scientist performed his masculinity, as well as a phallic metaphor for masculine posturing and attempts at domination over nature (and women), and ultimately, failure.

Having established this important historiographic context, in the second part of this chapter I shift to one of the main contributions of my project, which is to define and describe what I term “debunker discourse.” This refers to the rhetorical and performative position taken by scientists and skeptics who attempted to undermine Spiritualist performers. I argue that the authoritative position of the primarily male scientist debunkers created a platform from which debunker performances become a form of scientific knowledge production. However, as I will argue, the performances of debunker discourse have less to do with scientific principles such as objectivity and reason, than the desire on the part of the debunker to assert their intellectual and moral authority over those they are attempting to debunk. To animate the concept, I provide examples of contemporary popularizers of science who embody the debunker position as a key part of their celebrity image. I also extend my study of the figure of Tyndall by providing a close reading of his 1864 essay “Science and Spirits,” wherein he attempts to debunk the practice of Spiritualism, and I argue, provides a rather telling portrait of debunker discourse instead.

Victorian Masculinity

Before delving into a discussion of how nineteenth century scientists performed their masculinity, it is important to establish what masculinity meant to white, upper class

Victorians. In their introduction to the collection *Manliness and Morality: Middle-class Masculinity in Britain and America 1800-1940* J.A. Mangan and James Walvin note, “Central to the evolution of the male image was the Victorian ideal of ‘manliness.’ It took a variety of forms...embracing qualities of physical courage, chivalric ideals, virtuous fortitude with additional connotations of military and patriotic virtue” (1-3). Definitions of masculinity are invariably linked to other intersecting social constructions such as race, class, and sexuality (and the assumptions that underlie these categorizations), as well as being tied to social roles such as vocation. The masculine qualities attributed to the Victorian working-class labourer therefore would differ from that of an educated, middle-class scientist.⁶⁵ During the second half of the nineteenth century science was undergoing the process of professionalization (motivated in no small part by the desire to exclude women and clergymen), which means the types of masculinities scientists inhabited were also in a process of being defined.

The construction of masculine identity in the mid to late nineteenth century can be understood within the framework of two major changes that took place during the Victorian period. First, there was expanded industrialization, which fuelled the growth and expansion of the middle class and opened up new opportunities for men in business, trade, and white-collar professions such as engineers, managers, bankers, clerks, doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Social changes (such as the increasing secularization of education) meant that a prestigious university education was available to more men, fuelling the expansion of the bourgeoisie. Middle-class men would have found themselves in an emergent role within the public sphere: wealthy, educated, and authoritative. They would have also increasingly found themselves in city centres, where various iterations of

masculinity were on display, and could be tried on: the gentleman, the intellectual, the businessman, the dandy. One could argue, following Habermas in his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), that middle-class men were critical to the emergence of the public sphere in the eighteenth century. The intensity of public life in the Victorian era – the shocks of technological innovation, and accelerated pace of life – would have impacted the way that men defined and performed their gender. With the more traditional forms of masculinity not necessarily available to middle-class city dwelling men, they needed to redefine what it meant to project strength and authority. As James Eli Adams writes, “reconfigurations of masculinity frequently compensated for the loss of traditional, more assured forms of masculine identity and authority; they endeavoured to restore the prerogatives of a ‘manhood’ – as distinct from mere ‘maleness’ – that had been severely eroded by the pressures of modernity” (5).

The second change over the course of the nineteenth century that affected scientists in particular, was the cultural shift that accompanied modernity, from a theistic to a naturalistic understanding of the universe. Whereas early nineteenth century intellectual and cultural authority in Britain belonged to the Anglican clergymen of Oxford and Cambridge, by mid-century the new generation of Scientific Naturalists was seeking to claim that authority for themselves. The masculine self-fashioning of the Scientific Naturalists was defined in many ways in opposition to the masculinity of the priesthood. In particular, there was a move from the elitist ascetics who were born into privilege, to self-made men of action. This, however, should not be taken to mean that the two groups of powerful men had nothing in common. Fraternity, and the supposed superiority of men (whether God-given or ordained through nature and evolution) were

constants. Tyndall, for example, despite his materialism⁶⁶ maintained friendly correspondences with clergymen throughout his life.⁶⁷

The formation of the “man of science” took multiple forms, and as Milam and Nye note, “depending on the sociocultural context, male scientists chose from among a variety of masculine roles, including laboratory-based scientist heroes, outdoor, self-reliant men, sensitive and sympathetic readers of nature, and family men” (5). As I will demonstrate, for the Scientific Naturalist Tyndall, the site of masculine self-fashioning took place, amongst others, upon the mountaintop. What remains clear is that the goals of masculinity and science during this period were linked and, as Mangan and Walvin argue, “‘Manliness’ symbolized an attempt at a metaphysical comprehension of the universe. It represented an effort to achieve a *Weltanschauung* [worldview] with an internal coherence and external validity which determined ideals, forged identity and defined reality” (3).

The Professionalization of Science

Science as it existed in the early nineteenth century was drastically different from how it would eventually be shaped in the hands of the Scientific Naturalists. Frank M. Turner writes that before the category of professional scientist was created, “the major characteristics of British science were amateurism, aristocratic patronage, miniscule government support, limited employment opportunities, and peripheral inclusion within the clerically dominated universities and secondary schools” (360). As Ann Secord notes, many non-experts participated in science in the early nineteenth century, and were in fact an integral part of the drive for the professionalization of science. In particular, middle-

class fear over the working-class' ability to appropriate knowledge for their own means gave an urgency to the project of defining the discipline. Secord writes, "the contest over science in the early nineteenth century was a contest about who could participate and on what terms. The result of this contest was... the redefinition of popular science" (299). This shaped elite science, which had to defend and distance itself from working class science; the creation of the category of amateur was to be defined against the category of expert.

From this tension emerged the construction and definition of a new role: the scientist. Turner writes, "During the early stages of professionalism an elite from the emerging professional group attempts to project a new public image by formulating codes of ethics, strengthening professional organizations, establishing professional schools, penetrating existing educational institutions, and dispersing information to the general public" (359). Here Turner evokes the language of performance in his phrase "project a public image," emphasizing the performative work of presenting oneself to the public, or audience, in order to establish authority. How then did the newly emergent group of professional scientists assert their authority in this new role? They set the stage. The backdrops, or spaces in which science was performed became a way to both bolster their own credibility, and exclude non-desirable would-be-scientists from joining their ranks. Various spaces where professional science was practiced included the laboratory, institutions such as the Royal Society – where Tyndall was elected a Fellow in 1852 (Fig. 11), lecture halls, and on fieldwork, and expeditions.⁶⁸ The periodical press was an especially important space for the dissemination of scientific knowledge, but also one where expertise could be reinforced through the distancing moves of scientific writing for



Fig. 11. Professor Tyndall Lectures at the Royal Institution, 1870, *Illustrated London News* 14 May 1870. Public domain, via The Victorian Web.

popular versus expert audiences.

Entrance into the profession was available to a narrow group. The Scientific Naturalists were almost exclusively white, heterosexual, cisgendered, university educated men. This cannot be glossed over in service of an underdog non-conformist narrative. For despite the fact that men like Tyndall and T.H. Huxley considered themselves outsiders, having been educated “on the peripheries of the English intellectual establishment” (Turner 363), the fact remains that they were educated, albeit at Scottish universities and London medical schools rather than Oxbridge. At the heart of the tension between universities like Oxford and Cambridge and those on “the peripheries” was the divide between religious conformists and dissenters (or non-conformists). The prestige afforded to graduates from powerful institutions like Oxbridge was backed by the power of the Church of England. Scientific naturalists’ criticism of science based in religion inherently put them in conflict with these religious institutions. The intersecting identities of the

scientists themselves (be it gender, race, or creed) are of utmost importance because they influenced the type of science they did, and were present in the conclusions that they drew. Concerned with things like the energy drain of intellectual labour, the status of genius, and the racial superiority of the English, their scientific “discoveries” had the convenient benefit of cementing their own status as great thinkers, and protecting them from competition.

The Scientific Naturalists

The scientists who would come to define the profession were the Scientific Naturalists. They were the “young guard” who arrived on the scene in the 1850s, and, “included as its chief spokesmen T.H. Huxley, John Tyndall, Joseph Dalton Hooker, George Busk, Edward Frankland, Thomas Archer Hirst, John Lubbock, William Spottiswoode, and Herbert Spencer, all of whom composed the X-Club, and Henry Cole, Norman Lockyer, Francis Galton, and Lyon Playfair” (Turner 362). Together these men tended to drive all of the controversies in this period, and were very much concerned with trying to redefine what science was by rejecting natural theology.⁶⁹ They were a group of reformers who wanted to alter the ideas, metaphysics, and institutions of Victorian science – and beyond that Victorian society. There was an aggressive nature to their discourse, due in great part to the fact that many of them were outsiders of the Oxbridge system. The goal of the Scientific Naturalists was to undermine natural theology, which held that the existence of God and other religious concepts could be gleaned through empirical observation, logic, and reasoning. They also aimed to offer scientific theories that explained phenomena without any recourse to the supernatural. This brought them

into collision with the Anglican Church and its institutions, like Oxbridge (and of course, Spiritualism⁷⁰). They took up Darwin's naturalistic approach to evolution and science in general,⁷¹ and sought a purely naturalistic explanation for how nature operates, and an autonomous science free of God-talk and God-concepts. The stakes were high: intellectual and moral superiority, and the chance to claim for themselves the authoritative position of interpreters of nature and (hu)mankind. Here amongst all of the masculine posturing for intellectual domination it is useful to think of mountain climbing as a metaphor for domination over nature and other humans. Not only did key members of the Scientific Naturalists, such as Tyndall, literally enjoy the sport of mountaineering, they also sought to pitch their flag atop the peak of Victorian science, establishing a stronghold at the summit from which they could look down on others, and ward off potential threats.

A Darwin-worshipping internalist⁷² approach to the history of science would have us believe that the Scientific Naturalists summited the peak of science, never to be displaced. However, the fight for intellectual and cultural dominance was not nearly as clear-cut as this – there existed ongoing internal conflict within the scientific community itself. For example, Crosbie Smith has argued that there was a contest for scientific authority between the agnostic Scientific Naturalists of London (Tyndall, Huxley, and their X-Club) and the North British Physicists (such as Kelvin and Maxwell), who were trying to reconcile science and religion in their work. Within the sciences more broadly there exists infighting to this day – disputes between practitioners of “hard” (such as math, and physics) versus “soft” (biology, and social) sciences – a distinction that carries the correlation of “hard,” inscribed as masculine, sciences with greater legitimacy versus

“soft,” which carries connotations of the feminine. These power struggles and posturing – many of which played out in public forums as published debates⁷³ – should trouble the bedrock upon which any cohesive notion of the “men of science” is built. After all Darwin would not have needed a bulldog (Huxley’s nickname) if there were not any sense of a threat, even from within.

Huxley and Tyndall are two larger-than-life figures within the Scientific Naturalists, and their sometimes-polemic public performances in defense of secular science should be understood as a performance of a particular type of masculinity. Rather than undermining their authority, their aggression imbued their message with a hypermasculinity that lent credence to their beliefs – they were willing to battle for what they knew. In some exceptional cases this antagonism crossed a line, such as with Tyndall’s infamous 1874 “Belfast Address.” The address, delivered before the British Association for the Advancement of Science, discussed the evolution of scientific thought, and made an argument for a science separated from religion. Tyndall told the crowd, “All religious theories, schemes and systems, which embrace notions of cosmogony, or which otherwise reach into the domain of science, must, *insofar as they do this*, submit to the control of science, and relinquish all thought of controlling it” (61). Tyndall’s colleagues publicly condemned him for going too far, and distanced themselves from him. From hereon after he was referred to as a hot-headed materialist. Despite damage to his reputation, Tyndall’s career was not over. He maintained his position as the Director of the Laboratory of the Royal Institution until retiring in 1887, thirty-six years before Joan Evans would become the first woman allowed to give a Discourse

there. It would seem then, that to be a hot-headed materialist was still preferable to being a woman.

Manly-Men Mountaineering

Arguably one of the most extreme physical ways that Victorian scientists performed their masculinity was through mountaineering. Historian of science Michael Reidy notes that Victorian mountaineering narratives, “have never simply been about climbing... The mountains provided the perfect physical geography to discuss issues of race, class, nationalism, civilization, modernity, morality, and physical ability” (160). One of the most popular of these narratives was Tyndall’s *Hours of Exercise in the Alps*, a book where he combined his popular science writing with adventure narrative. *Hours of Exercise* was published in 1871 – the same year as Darwin’s *Descent of Man*. Indeed, there was a crude Darwinism that the Scientific Naturalists applied to their experiences on the mountain: strength comes through struggle, success goes to the strong and the most fit who are able to reach the top. Tyndall variously describes the labour of ascents up vertical walls of rock and ice, makes note of the constant danger of avalanches, rockslides, and crevasses, and casts himself as a motivating force for the rest of the climbing party. Describing an ascent up the Lauwinen-Thor he writes about overpowering the uncertainty of his (local, expert) guides, “There is a pause and hesitation. I remonstrate, whilst Hawkins calls out 'Forward!' Lauener [the guide] once more doggedly strikes his axe into the snow, and resumes the ascent” (11). Reaching the top of the mountain is a triumph of man over nature. Tyndall notes, “Looked at from the

top the pass will seem very formidable to the best of climbers; to an ordinary eye it would appear simply terrific” (15).

It is clear that Tyndall did have a reverence for the Alps. “ (“There was health in the air and hope in the mountains” [4]), and understandably so. The Alps are *dramatic*. It is the type of setting where the overwhelming awe of nature has one questioning one’s place in the universe. Tyndall peppers his adventure narrative with poetic reflections. Of the trek up the Lauwinen-Thor he muses,

I lay for an hour watching the augmenting glory of the mountains. The scene at hand was perfectly pastoral; green pastures, dotted with chalets, and covered with cows, which filled the air with the incessant tinkle of their bells. Beyond was the majestic architecture of the Alps, with its capitals and western bastions flushed with the warm light of the lowering sun. (Tyndall 4)

Tyndall’s love of the mountains, and their significance as a site where he conducted important research on glaciers and radiant heat, afforded him that most masculine of colonial achievements – a monument in his honour.⁷⁴ The memorial boulder (Fig. 12)⁷⁵ is located 2300 metres above sea level on the Belalp in the Swiss Alps (Tyndall’s favourite spot in the Alps where he spent his summers and built a home, the Villa Lusgen). Erected in 1911 by his wife Luisa, the monument measures an impressive 4.75 metres long, and 1.5 metres in girth – a phallic legacy if ever there was one.⁷⁶

The heroic physicality of mountaineering provided an antidote to the far less dynamic act of being an intellectual male hunched over a book, or tucked away in a laboratory. Tyndall gestures to this in the preface to *Hours of Exercise*, which opens, “A short time ago I published a book of ‘Fragments’, which might have been called ‘Hours of Exercise in the Attic and the Laboratory.’” The emphasis on exercise in Tyndall’s title – the book could have just as appropriately been called “Hours of Experiments in the



Fig.12. Tyndall Monument in Belalp, Switzerland. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Alps” as he was simultaneously climbing and conducting research on glaciers – is no doubt tied to the ideology of Muscular Christianity. Mangan and Walvin describe Muscular Christianity as holding an “excessive commitment to physical activity which was an unquestionable feature of middle class male society in Britain and the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century” (3). Muscular Christianity was a response to the crisis of masculinity, and sought to (re) instil virility in Victorian men. Physical fitness was linked to morality, and Christian organizations, such as the YMCA (Fig. 13) provided spaces in which men could nurture the connection between their bodies and souls. In the case of the Scientific Naturalists, perhaps a more appropriate term would have been “Muscular Agnosticism” but the central ideology remains intact – character is built through physical activity, a Darwinian logic by which a man could be

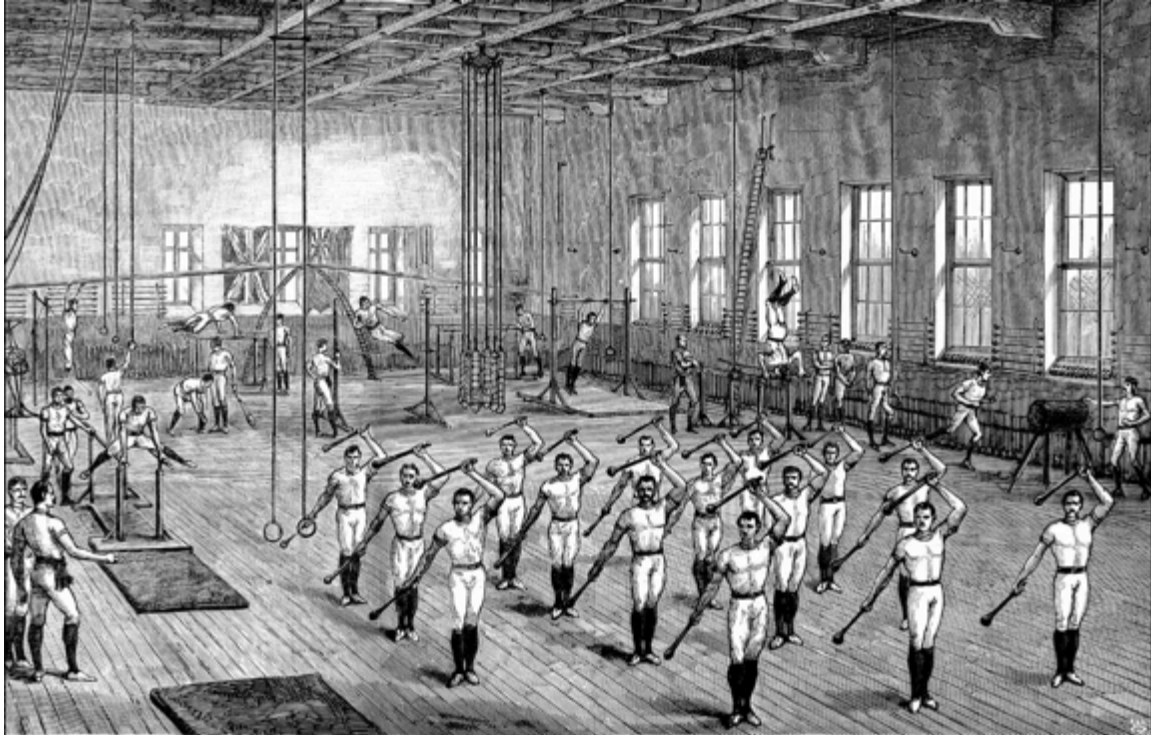


Fig. 13. Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) gymnasium, Longacre, London, wood engraving, c. 1888. Opened by the Prince of Wales on June 16, 1888. Public domain, via Encyclopaedia Britannica.

self-made through hard work, determination and struggle. In “Biological Thought, Athletics and the Formation of a ‘Man of Character’: 1830-1900,” Roberta Park explains, “From a multitude of sources the new gentleman was proclaimed to be the man who was an ‘aristocrat of character’ not an aristocrat by birth” (7) which would have no doubt appealed to the Scientific Naturalists, middle-class non-conformists⁷⁷ that they were.

Muscular Christianity is a misnomer in more ways than one, because the scientists scaling the Alps were not particularly muscular (Fig. 14). Reidy rightfully points out that local guides did the real physical work on the mountains; cutting steps in the snow, and carrying the heavy scientific instruments (171). Interestingly, though they occupied a lower-class than their amateur Victorian employers, and were sometimes racialized – in *Hours of Exercise in the Alps* Tyndall refers to the “brown visage of my guide” (21) – the



Fig. 14. John Tyndall by Maull & Polyblank, albumen carte-de-visite, early-mid 1860s. © National Portrait Gallery. Reproduced with permission.

labour of the guides is not glossed over in the climbing narratives. Rather, the guides are named, and often described in fawning, even eroticized, terms. Tyndall describes that same brown-visaged guide, the German-speaking Swiss local Christian Lauener thusly,

Lauener is more than six feet high, and mainly a mass of bone; his legs are out of proportion, longer than his trunk; and he wears a short-tail coat, which augments the apparent discrepancy. Those massive levers were now plied with extraordinary vigour to project his body through space ; and it was gratifying to be thus assured that the man was in first-rate condition, and fully up to the hardest work. (2)

Elsewhere Tyndall notes Lauener’s manly answer to pain while on the mountainside, marvelling, “To quell the pangs of toothache he had chewed a cigar” (15).

Reidy, himself a mountaineer, believes this fetishization of their guides (my term, not his) can be explained by the fraternal bonding that takes place on the slopes. He

writes, “with the creation of climbing came the advent of climbing partners, and a bond formed between men irrespective of social class or education. Then and now, this is reverently referred to as a ‘fellowship of the rope’” (173). Their relationships with their guides allowed British amateurs access to a different type of rugged, muscular masculinity that they themselves often lacked, and, Reidy notes, “by co-opting the guide’s body...the Victorian mountaineer could combine elements of both working-class and middle-class masculinity, mixing autonomy, skill, and physical strength with judgement, restraint, and mental prowess, a swaggering masculinity with a respectable one” (Reidy 174).

To this I would add that the guides can also be understood as masculine avatars/objects of desire for the scientist mountaineers like Tyndall. The “fellowship of the ropes” can be linked to the Victorian notion of ‘manly love’, which Jeffrey Richards in “‘Passing the Love of Women’: Manly Love and Victorian Society,” explains,

Firstly...constituted a form of brotherhood... of a spiritual rather than physical kind. Secondly, it involved notions of service and sacrifice, frequently death on behalf of the beloved. Thirdly, it is higher than and different from, rather than a substitute for, the love of women... the love of a man for a man is spiritual, transcendent and free from base desire. (93)

The homoerotics of the mountains is something that Reidy does not acknowledge, or seem to grasp⁷⁸ when he asks, “So why did they go to the mountains?” – while unironically detailing mountaineer Leslie Stephen’s good looks and “striking red beard” (59). Part of the answer to the question seems obvious: these men loved each other’s company, they loved celebrating themselves and each other, and an essential part of this was the differentiation of such company from that of women. In a telling passage from *Hours of Exercise* Tyndall recounts a harrowing episode when the climbing party’s porter fell into a crevasse while crossing a glacier (Fig. 15). Here the erotics of the mountain are

also present: men falling into/down an icy, vaginal hole together – a dark, dangerous slit in the earth, the inverse of the phallic mountain.⁷⁹ In the midst of the heroic rescue Tyndall admonishes their guide who had “seemed to have lost all self-control.” He tells the man, “If you behave like a man, we shall save him; if like a woman, he is lost” (Tyndall 147). The guide, in his *hysteria* was endangering the lives of the other men. Tyndall’s attempt to pull his guide back from the precipice of overt emotion or affectation was to compare him to the most undesirable of creatures. It appears this worked, and the man in the crevasse was saved. Rather than romanticizing the Platonic

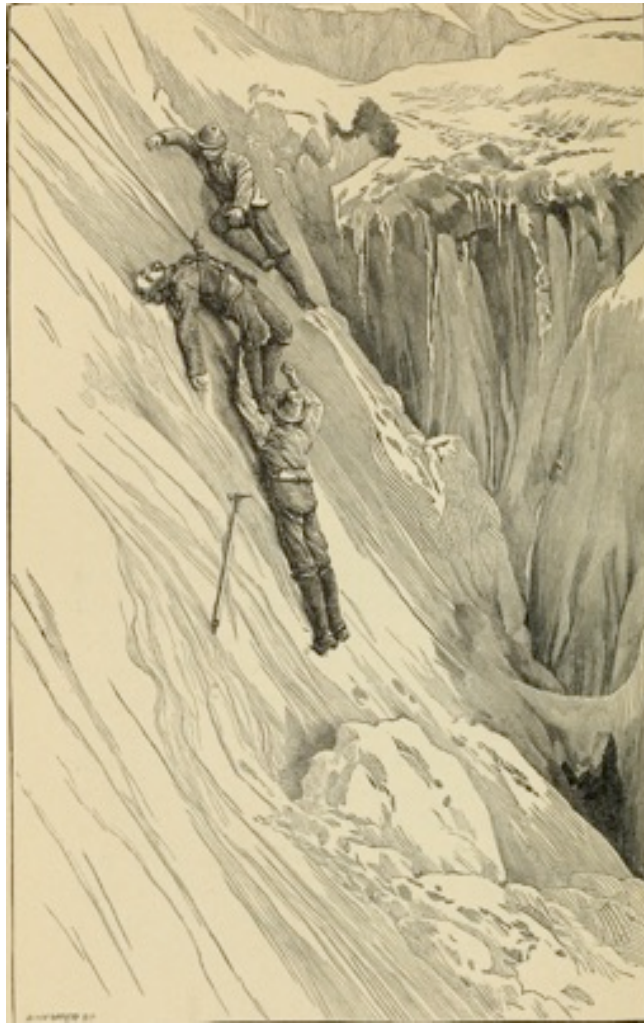


Fig. 15. “Recovery of our Porter” from *Hours of Exercise in the Alps* (1871). Public domain, via The Internet Archive.

ideal of ‘manly love’, or trying to justify it based on women’s supposed intellectual, physical, and emotional inferiority, these boys clubs should be named for what they are: misogyny.

A foil to the mountaintop masculine self-fashioning was the inconvenient fact that women climbers were also drawn to the Alps in large numbers. Reidy explains,

Because women were regularly climbing to high altitude, members of the male climbing fraternity focused more diligently on finding zones where women and lesser men could be excluded...male alpinists attempted to invent an all-male upper zone that could be distinguished from the supposedly demasculinized glaciers and valleys. (164)

Far from the confident, heroic professional image the Scientific Naturalists projected, this conjures the image of little boys in a tree house with a “no girls allowed” sign.

The Woman “Problem”

Ultimately, the biggest threat to masculine scientific authority did not come from religion, or other male scientists, but from women (and other “lesser” beings). Masculinity may be hard to define, but is nothing if not fragile. From their position as self-styled authorities the “men of science” looked to nature and experimentation in order to prove their pre-existing worldviews about gender, race, and class. The professionalization of science was concurrent with the rise of women’s rights movement,⁸⁰ and masculine anxiety about the changing role of women in society made the project of understanding women from a scientific perspective (and using science to put them in their place) all the more urgent. There were many reasons given to exclude women from the sciences. The Scientific Naturalists demonstrated a great enthusiasm for measuring and comparing the sizes of bodies (the jokes write themselves), but in

particular craniums and brains.⁸¹ Craniology was based on a core assumption that examining the physical body could reveal secrets about the mind (Russett 31). At least until the end of the nineteenth century the majority of scientists believed in a correlation between intelligence and brain size – proving the supposed intellectual superiority of white men (Russett 33). Biogenetic Law (Fig. 16), promoted and popularized by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, a combination of Lamarck and Darwin’s “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” wherein the development of an organism expresses all of the intermediate forms of its ancestors throughout evolution, was used to explain that women and racialized people were stalled in the evolutionary process – closer to children and “primitive” races than Victorian gentlemen. Echoes of this Darwinian logic can also be seen in Freud’s theories on psychosexual development that claim homosexuality as an immature perversion that must be moved past on the evolution to “healthy” adult



Fig. 16. Haeckel’s depiction of his biogenetic law, or recapitulation theory from *Anthropogenie* (1874). Public domain, via The Internet Archive.

(hetero)sexuality. In his famous 1905 work, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud identifies homosexuality (or as it was called at the time, “inversion”) as a “sexual aberration.” Under the heading of “Prevention of Inversion” he writes,

Often enough the first impulses after puberty go astray, though without any permanent harm resulting...in the case of men a childhood recollection of the affection of their mother and others of the female sex who looked after them when they were children contributes powerfully to directing their choice towards women; on the other hand their early experience of being deterred by their father from sexual activity and their competitive relation with him deflect them from their own sex. (Freud 95)

While children may express homosexual desire, the expectation is that they will grow out of it. Freud puts a finer point on this in his 1935 response to a letter from an American mother asking for help regarding her homosexual son. Freud wrote to the distressed woman, “we consider [homosexuality] to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development” (Freud).⁸²

The newly emerged Victorian energy physics were applied to human bodies as if they were engines. Conservation of energy was used to explain why women were unsuited to intellectual pursuits like science. It was believed that intellectual labour took a strenuous toll on the body (the mental equivalent of mountain climbing perhaps?), and that because women’s more complex reproductive systems placed additional strain on their bodies, they could not afford to exert energy elsewhere. The physiological differences of sex meant women were more suited to bleeding than books. Henry Maudsley (1835-1918) the pioneering English psychiatrist echoed the beliefs of his peers when he wrote,

[people interested in the higher education of women] seem positively to ignore the fact that there are significant differences between the sexes...the male organization is one, and the female organization another, and that, let come what may in the assimilation of female and male education and labour, it will not be

possible to transform a woman into a man...she will retain her special functions, and must have a special sphere of development and activity determined by the performance of those functions. (466)

The special function Maudsley was referring to was motherhood, as “not for one moment were Victorian women permitted to forget that their essence was reproductive” (Russett 43). There was a fear that pursuit of intellectual training would make women lose sight of their supposed true goal, and that girls should rather be educated primarily and chiefly for motherhood (Russett 61).

Excavating the Women of Science

So far in this chapter I have examined the various ways that scientific authority came to be aligned with masculinity in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Through the professionalization process, male scientists, in particular the Scientific Naturalists, became the self-styled experts of Natural Law, and cemented the heroic image of the Victorian “man of science.” Some of the more extraordinary performances of Victorian scientific masculinity took place upon the mountaintop, where men like Tyndall performed experiments and literally looked down upon their perceived intellectual and physical inferiors. And yet, despite all of the efforts to exclude them, women in science did persist. It is within this context that we can begin to erode the narrative of the hero-scientist conquering the Alps, nature, and the bounds of human knowledge. For even on the mountain range, Victorian women bested men, and, as Reidy has noted:

as climbing grew in popularity, it became increasingly difficult to sustain the process of gendering the sport masculine. Women climbers, including Lucy Walker and Marguerite Claudia ‘Meta’ Brevoort...were celebrated climbers in their own right. In 1871, Walker became the first woman to summit the Matterhorn.⁸³ That same year, Brevoort climbed the Weisshorn, a mountain that had overpowered both Tyndall and Stephen on their first attempts, and which

Tyndall had finally summited only a decade earlier. (163-64)

Not only did these women climb the same mountains as Tyndall and his colleagues, they did so in skirts, corsets, and petticoats.

Victorian “women of science” could be found in laboratories working as assistants, as computers making calculations, and in the field collecting specimens (botany and geology were two scientific fields where the inclusion of women was relatively accepted, or perhaps tolerated. They also could be scientific illustrators and popular science writers). For example, Mary Anning,⁸⁴ a poor woman from Lime Regis (what would become known as the Jurassic coast) was self-taught in geology and anatomy, and supported her family by selling the fossils she discovered on the shores of her hometown. Mary was the first person to discover complete skeletons of Ichthyosaurus in 1811, Plesiosaurus in 1823, and Pterodactyl in 1828. She painstakingly unearthed, cleaned, and prepared the specimens and sold them to male scientists who did not credit her for her work (Eylott). British author and academic Richard Holmes unearthed letters and documents from the Royal Society’s archive that point to the many contributions by women scientists, detailed in his 2010 article “The Royal Society’s lost women scientists.” In it he notes, “It is at once evident that [women] played a significant part in many team projects, working both as colleagues and as assistants (though hitherto only acknowledged in their family capacities as wives, sisters or daughters).” This rings true in the example of Tyndall, whose wife Louisa assisted with his research and writing. Louisa Tyndall was never credited with her contributions to her husband’s work. The collapsing of her identity and work into his is summed up on the epitaphs of their shared gravestone in Surrey, England (Fig. 17). Where Tyndall is described variously as, “F.R.S. [Fellow of



Fig. 17. John and Louisa Tyndall’s gravestone in Saint Bartholomew’s churchyard, Haslemere, Surrey UK, following cleaning restoration arranged by the Haslemere Society in 2024. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

the Royal Society], Scientist, Teacher, Mountaineer” her inscription simply reads, “his wife.”

There are a few notable examples of Victorian women who were recognized in their own right for their scientific achievements – Marie Curie, Ada Lovelace, and Mary Somerville are exceptional in this sense. However, these were women who had

significant class and racial privilege, and therefore had more opportunities available to them. By and large, the “great men” of science were propped up by the invisible, but essential labour of women – wives, daughters, servants, and assistants. After all, we can only assume Darwin (or Tyndall for that matter) was not making his own lunch. Darwin and his wife Emma had ten children together,⁸⁵ and while he is generally regarded as a devoted father and family man, the bar for Victorian fatherhood was set relatively low. Women’s (both mothers’ and female servants’) critical labour of creating homes, and birthing and raising children, afforded many of the “men of science” the cultural capital attached to the identity of “family man.” The Cambridge Darwin Correspondence Project notes that the Darwins, “like all wealthy Victorian parents, employed servants to care for the everyday needs of their large family. For instance, when they had four children aged less than six years old in 1851, they employed eight servants including two nursery maids” (“Darwin and Fatherhood”). This is the type of labour that intellectual men still rely on, and institutions like universities take for granted in their systems like tenure track. It takes a great deal of time to devote one’s life to intellectual pursuit. And yet, the anxiety around women’s changing social roles cannot be solely blamed for the ways in which the Scientific Naturalists performed. In their Introduction to *Scientific Masculinities* Erika Milam and Robert Nye note, “So-called crises of masculinity exist in each scientific culture we have investigated and cannot be reduced to specific moments of social upheaval or anxiety” (8). Perhaps then it is worth considering if masculinity itself, as it exists in patriarchy, is the actual crisis.

Performing Debunkers

I now move on to a crucial contribution of this dissertation: the defining and analysis of what I am terming “debunker discourse.” In the context of my study debunkers are significant in that they stage counter-performances to those of the Spiritualists I discuss in the following chapters, providing a gendered discourse in opposition to Spiritualism that is bolstered by scientific authority. Performance is a rich lens through which to deconstruct science in that it allows for an embodied analysis of the individual actors in a field that is so bound up with ideas of objectivity and disinterestedness. In other words, to consider the performance of scientists is to consider scientist’s subjectivity, and a useful tool for understanding how that subjectivity influences knowledge production, and invariably, power relations. In this section I define debunker discourse, and extend my examination of Tyndall by performing a close reading of his essay “Science and Spirits” wherein he attempts to debunk Spiritualism.

The subject of debunkers has received relatively little scholarly attention. There is far more work that inhabits the position of skeptic or debunker⁸⁶ than that which critically examines the debunker position itself. Much of the research that does exist on debunkers is in the area of psychology and speaks to current problems for science communication in the age of social media and disinformation. For example, Chao et al. examine debunker’s identity in the context of trying to understand the most effective way to disseminate “debunking information” in response to social media rumours. However, the authors of this study take for granted that debunking is a neutral, or indeed a net positive/desirable, activity. For example, they state that social media users view information from “reputable” sources more positively than that from “disreputable” sources, without

interrogating the concept of reputability (Chao et al. 3). In some cases this research intersects with the concerns and aesthetics of performance, for example in the study by Mengyu et al. on the role background music choice plays in the efficacy of Tik Tok debunker videos by experts.

A scholar who looked at debunking from a historical perspective is American historian Frank Klement. His 1947⁸⁷ article titled “Debunking the Debunkers” examines debunking as “a biographical art” and “a logical product of the ‘golden twenties’” (Klement 366). Klement interestingly links the practice of debunking to historiography when he writes, “Modern man, exposed to science and skepticism, refused to accept the legends of America’s past; he wanted to view the historical characters of yesteryear as they were – not as posterity, indulging in apotheosis, had depicted them” (367). Klement’s article primarily focuses on the less-than-fawning biographies of powerful men and situates debunkers as being dissenters from the status quo of historical writing (369). Here he is following the original use of the word as coined by the novelist William E. Woodward and which came to be defined as, “‘To remove the ‘nonsense’ or false sentiment from; hence to remove a person from his ‘pedestal’” (Oxford English Dictionary qtd. in Klement 367). As with the aforementioned psychology studies, this article does not attempt to define the aesthetics, politics, and specific practices of debunkers as I do here. My interpretation of debunker deals less with knocking a venerated person off of a pedestal than the act of implicitly asserting one’s own place atop one via debunker performance.

The scholar whose work comes closest to what I am arguing here is David J. Hess, whose study on paranormal skeptics sits at the intersection of anthropology, science

and technology studies, and cultural studies. In his 1993 book *Science in the New Age: The Paranormal, Its Defenders and Debunkers, and American Culture*, Hess writes about those who occupy a skeptical position “constitut[ing] themselves through a strong sense of a negative Other” (61). That is, the identity formation of the skeptic is based partly in negation: they define themselves by a strict opposition to what they are not – “the paranormal Other” (66). Hess and I diverge in that I differentiate the skeptical from the debunker position (which I elaborate on below). Despite Hess’ use of the term “debunker” in the title of his book, he primarily identifies them as skeptics within the text. Where Hess and my work do overlap is in an assessment of the skeptic/debunker’s tone, which he similarly identifies as polemical, and intended to ridicule their opponent (14-15, 64). I extend Hess’ work here by reading the figure of the debunker through a feminist Performance Studies lens, and identifying the markers of what I term “debunker discourse.”

In “Worlds of Wonder: Sensation and the Victorian Scientific Performance” Morus explores many concepts that I build upon here including the identity of the scientific performer, public performances as instantiations of political power, and the practice of playing to one’s peers. In a section of his essay that hold particular relevance for debunker discourse Morus writes,

Knowledge is always tailored to specific audiences and circumstances – it is the possession of particular social groups... Understanding the dynamics of performances – how they are made, by whom, and for whom – thus can tell us something important about the political distribution of scientific knowledge and power. (778)

Understanding the dynamics of debunker performance allows us to look at specific instances where intellectual and moral guardrails are asserted and the boundaries of scientific authority and knowledge production are staked.

Debunker discourse, as I am defining it here, is the performative practice of asserting one's intellectual (and I argue, moral) authority over someone deemed incorrect. Debunker discourse goes beyond a desire to correct facts, myth-bust, or set the record straight and is as much about the person doing the debunking, and how they want to be perceived, as the contents of their argument. Debunker discourse is skepticism with a bit of smugness thrown in, because they just cannot help themselves. What differentiates the skeptic from the debunker is a sense of humility in the former that is grounded in a genuine openness, questioning, and dialogic willingness versus someone who is confident in their correctness and *needs it to be known*.

There are a few key elements of debunker performances. First, they rely on an imbalance of power. The debunker occupies an authoritative subject position and utilises their discursive position to perform their superiority – of intellect, of reason, of the ability to see what others cannot or will not. Debunker discourse is also, by definition, performative. No one is silently a debunker; it involves publically taking a stand and “calling someone out.” As such, audience is of central import, that is, who the debunker is playing to (or against). The rhetorical strategy of appealing to a certain segment of the audience (e.g. “can you believe this?!”) is an opportunity to draw and enforce intellectual and often moral boundaries. The audience makeup is also essential to debunker discourse, and is related to the aforementioned power imbalances. The debunker addresses with which I am concerned are not conversations between peers; squabbles and barbs lobbed

between academics in the pages of peer-reviewed journals, though fascinating performances in and of themselves, do not apply. Rather, debunker discourse primarily depends on the expert addressing a lay audience.

Who gets to be publicly confident in their position without much pushback? And what contributes to this authoritative position? Credibility with an audience is forged through a combination of credentials, the role of expertise, respect within one's field, and social markers such as gender, race, and class. This can be understood in relation to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital, which he defines as, "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 119). The durability of a debunker's position is in many ways tied to social capital. Tyndall's reputation as a scientist, and indeed his social capital, was bolstered by his professional expertise, which delineated him as a member of an intellectual class. His professional connections and membership in organizations such as the Royal Institution of Great Britain⁸⁸ and as a Fellow of the Royal Society strengthened his authoritative position.

Crucially *there is nothing essentially gendered about debunker discourse*. Debunking, in theory at least, is an equal opportunity activity – there is no particular social location that has monopoly on self-righteousness. Debunker discourse also has the quality of being timeless, with tone, if not exact language, maintaining consistency over time. However the powerful cultural positions afforded to men, especially in areas like the sciences, means they flourish there. The gendered trope of the male/debunker female/believer is a familiar and culturally legible one. The stereotypical dynamic was

famously inverted in the cult television series *The X-Files* (1993-2002). In the show the role of skeptic scientist is assigned to Dr. Dana Scully, an MD who never misses an opportunity to roll her eyes at the beliefs of her FBI partner Fox Mulder, who famously “wants to believe.” Over the course of the series these roles are complicated and renegotiated, particularly in the ways in which Scully’s rational scientific epistemology abuts her Catholicism. However, the character of Scully also inhabits many signifiers of masculinity – her costuming of suits and men’s overcoats, her voice, and her career – a fact not lost on the many queer and lesbian fans of the show that uphold the character as a cherished icon.⁸⁹

To return to real versus fictional scientists, celebrity and being a publicly facing figure is an important element of debunker discourse. It is a mantle often taken up by science communicators and popularisers of science. They hold status as both authoritative expert and person with access to a large platform, making their debunker position perhaps especially loud. Contemporary examples of science communicators for whom being a debunker is central to their celebrity image include Richard Dawkins and Neil deGrasse Tyson – men who seem to relish using their scientific knowledge and authoritative positions to ridicule people with differing beliefs (or as they would probably put it, an inability to grasp the basic facts of existence). deGrasse Tyson regularly takes to X.com (formerly Twitter) – that rare and fascinating space where celebrities have unmediated access to the public without their publicists or editors – to perform his debunker position. His feed, a mix of corny jokes, random scientific facts, and pedantic provocations is a space where his advocacy for scientific literacy is almost always paired with an insult to the intelligence of deniers (see, for example Figs. 18 and 19). There is an arrogance,



Fig. 18. A typical post on “X” by deGrasse Tyson. Adapted from [https://x.com/neiltyson/status/991653323525664769] under the fair dealing exception for research purposes, as outlined in the Canadian Copyright Act.



Fig. 19. Another post whereby deGrasse Tyson demonstrates how to talk down to one’s intellectual opponents. Adapted from [https://x.com/neiltyson/status/1312371036655099907] under the fair dealing exception for research purposes, as outlined in the Canadian Copyright Act.

condescension, and smug superiority to his rhetorical style. Take, for example, two typical tweets of his: “To be scientifically literate is to empower yourself to know when someone else is full of shit.” and “If you’re always successful at bullshitting others it’s because you don’t hang around people who are smarter than you.” There is, perhaps, an argument to be made that it is the big personalities that grab and hold people’s attention; that these performances animate what can be dry material and help bridge the “so what” of abstract concepts like theoretical physics to explain how and why they matter.

However the self-satisfaction and degree to which scientists engaging in debunker discourse seem to relish the position casts doubt on it being an intentional choice. There are also many popularisers of science who do not inhabit the debunker style. Take for example Carl Sagan and Bill Nye, two wildly popular science communicators who do not insult the intelligence of their lay audiences while attempting to communicate their passion for the importance of science education.⁹⁰ This is exemplified in Sagan’s popular science book *Cosmos* (1980), which would go on to become a thirteen-part television series that aired on PBS from 1980-81. Likewise, Nye’s television show *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, a science education program geared towards children that ran from 1994-1999 on PBS, presented science in a funny and engaging way. The impact of a science communicator who does not speak down to their audience can be measured in the numerous scientists who have publicly credited Sagan and *Cosmos* with sparking an interest in science that led to their careers; amongst them is Nye, and perhaps ironically given his own rhetorical style, deGrasse Tyson.

Tyndall, The Debunker

Here I extend my analysis of debunker discourse by turning my attention to an example of Tyndall taking on the role. By including him here I do not wish to suggest that Tyndall is the epitome of debunkers, or even one of the worst. However, his 1864 essay, “Science and Spirits,” offers a good look at some of the debunking tactics that I have elaborated above, and most importantly, sees the quintessential “man of science” himself squaring off with the Spiritualists after attending a séance. In this half of the chapter I perform a close reading of Tyndall’s essay, offering analysis of it as an example of debunker discourse.

Tyndall’s scientific writing and argumentation was generally not typical of the debunker style and rhetoric I have elaborated on here. He was a popular science communicator before the term existed, and his texts are engaging and accessible. This in large part is due to the considerable effort he put in to developing a compelling style as a lecturer at the Royal Institution.⁹¹ Tyndall’s popular scientific writing is descriptive and evocative, drawing the reader in, and making the case for science to a lay audience. In his *Fragments of Science for Unscientific People* he writes, “It is the function of science, not as some think to divest this universe of its wonder and its mystery, but, as in the case here before us, to point out the wonder and the mystery of common things” (Tyndall 84). He writes with an ease, enthusiasm, and talent for communicating complex scientific ideas. For example, in a lecture delivered to working class men titled “Matter and Force” Tyndall remarks, “wonderful is the play of force by which the molecules of water build themselves into the sheets of crystal which every winter roof your ponds and lakes. If I could show you the actual progress of this molecular architecture, its beauty would

delight and astonish you. A reversal of the process may be actually shown” (83). He then goes on to demonstrate and describe a simple experiment using a lamp and a plate of ice. His prose is interspersed with these accessible explanations of experiments – in the above lecture on Matter and Force he describes ten different experiments over the course of twenty-one pages, and uses many more metaphors and real-life examples to describe the mechanisms behind the physics principles.

Tyndall’s writing also reflects a humility that goes hand in hand with the agnostic position he expressed in his writing. He frequently expounds on the limitations of human knowledge, writing for example,

The mind of man may be compared to a musical instrument with a certain range of notes, beyond which in both directions we have an infinitude of silence. The phenomena of matter and force lie within our intellectual range, and as far as they reach we will at all hazards push our inquiries. But behind, and above, and around all, the real mystery of this universe lies unsolved, and, as far as we are concerned, is incapable of solution. (Tyndall 93)

This humility for the most part extends to a gentlemanly discourse when addressing his opponents. For example, in summing up his critique of the book *Eight Lectures on Miracles* by English theologian Rev. James Bowling Mozley Tyndall wrote, “Having thus submitted Mr. Mozley’s views to the examination which they challenged at the hands of a student of the order of Nature, I am unwilling to quit his book without expressing my high admiration and respect for his ability” (69). All of this is to say that taking his larger body of popular scientific writing into account, Tyndall for the most part does not perform the type of posturing masculinity typical of debunker discourse. This perhaps makes his indictment of Spiritualism all the more interesting.

“Science and Spirits” recounts the events of a séance that took place on May 8, 1857 at the home of Newton and Camilla Dufour Crosland at their home in Blackheath,

London (Sera-Shriar 48-49). Curiously, the essay was only published for the first time in 1864 in the popular journal *The Reader*, and again in Tyndall's 1871 two volume series *Fragments of Science for Unscientific People: A Series of Detached Essays, Lectures, and Reviews*. The gap in time between the events of the séance and Tyndall's publication of them – a not insignificant seven years – indicates that debunking Spiritualism was not of urgent import for Tyndall. Placing some distance between the event and his account of it could also be read as a kindness to his hosts, who he also kept anonymous in the essay. However, it does seem significant that Tyndall included the essay in a volume that was intended as a popular science reader.⁹² The fact that he found it important enough to include there speaks to his desire to insert his ideas into the discourse surrounding Spiritualism and communicate them to his large audience. Throughout the volume Tyndall demonstrates his expertise on topics such as radiation, germ theory, scientific materialism, and the conflict between science and religion. "Science and Spirits" comes towards the end of the book, and the weight of the cumulative work to that point emphasizes Tyndall's expertise as a scientist and recorder of natural phenomena, in turn strengthening the authority of his debunker position. The publication of what would be Tyndall's first and last public comments on Spiritualism also crucially appear in a form that not only solely centres his interpretation of events, but cannot be responded to. The span of time between the séance Tyndall is recounting and the publication of his book make his remarks all the more likely to go unchallenged.

Tyndall opens the essay by framing his relationship to Spiritualism, and the séance in question. We learn that it happened "Some time ago" (Tyndall 469) and that he was an invited guest, which signals to the reader/audience that he did not seek this

experience out himself. In fact, the invitation was originally intended for Tyndall's friend and mentor at the Royal Institution, Michael Faraday, who Tyndall is careful to let the reader know, declined. He writes, "a celebrated philosopher was invited, or rather entreated, by one of his friends to meet and question [the spirits]. He had, however, already made their acquaintance, and did not wish to renew it" (Tyndall 469). Could this be a polite way of saying he had seen enough? In this passage we also glimpse two important things: that men of science and of spirits were not mutually exclusive,⁹³ and that spiritualists were aware that the potential impact of having a celebrated man of science verify the veracity of their claims would have been positive for their movement. This would have undoubtedly impacted the mood and energy of the séance – there was a particular pressure on both scientists and Spiritualists to perform.

Tyndall also devotes space early in the essay to insisting that he did not arrive at the séance with his mind made up (which would be incompatible with his objective scientific approach): "Absolute unbelief in the facts was by no means my condition of mind. On the contrary, I thought it probable that some physical principle, not evident to the spiritualists themselves, might underlie their manifestations" (469). This rings true to what we know about Tyndall – as someone who frequently expressed an agnostic position in his writing he wasn't one to outright dismiss things outside of his knowledge or experience. Rather, he would subject them to the scrutiny of the scientific method.⁹⁴ This also speaks to the fact that scientific research into Spiritualism was a common practice. In Britain there existed the Society for Psychical Research (founded in 1882), and in the United States various Ivy Universities (including Harvard⁹⁵, Stanford⁹⁶ and Duke⁹⁷) engaged in psychical research during the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries.⁹⁸ That being said, 1857, when Tyndall wrote his essay, was relatively early in the history of Spiritualism, with the Society for Psychical Research coming much later. Tyndall attempts to give the impression that he was taking the séance seriously, however the line “*not evident to the spiritualists themselves*” is telling. Before we have even been introduced to the participants of the séance, he has framed them as somewhat oblivious.

There are other ways that Tyndall subtly lets his reader know that he is not “all-in” on the experience. After examining the tables and chairs – a common debunker/investigator move “in order to be assured that there was no trickery in the furniture” – Tyndall recounts, “I then first learned that my hospitable host had arranged that the *séance* should be a dinner-party. This was to me an unusual form of investigation; but I accepted it, as one of the accidents of the occasion” (470). He thus frames, from the beginning, the séance-cum-dinner party as outside of the bounds of proper scientific investigation, chafing perhaps at the social or entertainment connotations of the gathering. What are the epistemological implications of conducting research in a context in which you have an inkling that there are people who are trying to deceive you? At what point is there slippage between the role of scientist into that of investigator, detective, cop?

Tyndall also signals his disbelief by consistently referring to the medium in quotations – notable since he does not refer to anyone or anything else in this way, not even the spirits. Upon introducing the medium, one of the first things he does is comment on her physical and affective appearance. Tyndall writes, “The ‘medium’ arrived – a delicate looking young lady who appeared to have suffered much from ill health” (470). Commenting on her gender, her youth, her delicacy, and speculating about her health all

have the effect of undercutting her authority. It is, however, interesting to consider that the medium's "ill health" and therefore implied closeness to death could perhaps bolster her authority with the Spiritualists. Perceived proximity to, or brushes with, the afterlife would position her in a liminal space between life and death where the spirits supposedly traveled.

Performing Disbelief, Taking Pleasure

A key element of debunker discourse is the pleasure, sometimes bordering on glee, that debunkers appear to take in exposing something as fraud. Debunker performances often feature a dramatic reveal, the "aha!" moment when they draw back the curtain to reveal the mechanisms of deception, and in the process, their own brilliance. It is a chance for the debunker to demonstrate their own rhetorical quickness and how clever they are. These are generally the specific parts of the performances when debunkers cannot help but expose the theatricality of their endeavours. Because debunking, like theatre, is often a live art there are tell-tale gestures that telegraph the pleasure of the "aha!" moment. James "The Amazing" Randi (1928-2020) was an American conjurer who devoted much of his career to highly theatricalized debunkings of the paranormal. In a video in which he demonstrates the techniques behind various "psychic" performances, Randi reveals one of the tricks used by mentalists to duplicate hidden drawings. He tells the audience, "One favourite involves turning your back and covering your eyes while the drawing is being made. Now I've always wondered why you would cover your eyes while your back is turned" ("James Randi debunks Uri Geller"). Instead of providing a verbal answer to this rhetorical question, Randi turns

around, covers his eyes, and then reveals a small mirror that he uses to make eye contact with the camera (Fig. 20). While Randi does not actually wink, he might as well have. This gesture towards the generally self-selecting debunker audience acts as a shared moment of smugness; *we* are smarter than *them*.

There are a number of moments in “Science and Spirits” when Tyndall reveals this part of himself, finding it difficult to conceal the pleasure in having exposed someone, caught them in a lie, or *bested* them. Early on in Tyndall’s recounting of the séance a gentleman, referred to only as “X.” (his host, Newton Crosland) is demonstrating automatic writing, and claiming to channel “oracular sentences” and the thoughts of others (470). Tyndall quickly pounces on the opportunity: “Here, I thought, is something that can be immediately tested. I said immediately to X. – ‘If you wish to win to your cause an apostle, who will proclaim your principles to the world without fear, tell me what I am now thinking of.’ X. reddened and did *not* tell me my thought” (470-71). This exchange can be read as a challenge, and is in the sense that Tyndall is invoking his own public stature and celebrity. He *could* “proclaim [the spiritualist’s] principles to the world” – he had the platform and a trusting audience. He could also, as is the case here, proclaim to the world that the Spiritualist was a fraud. The inclusion of the detail that X.



Fig. 20. Screenshot from Randi’s video depicting his “aha!” moment of connecting with the audience. Adapted from [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXv3TvB4LNI>] under the fair dealing exception for research purposes, as outlined in the Canadian Copyright Act.

blushed when challenged by Tyndall may be intended as evidence of the Spiritualist's deceptions, but it can also be read as a logical affective response to the situation.

Tyndall's accusatory question appears designed to elicit embarrassment, and it did. What is telling is that Tyndall presents the exchange as if it were a "slam-dunk" on behalf of science and truth, when in reality it seems more in line with the tired old joke at the expense of purported psychics that they "should have seen [something] coming."

Tyndall also takes the opportunity to challenge the medium, setting himself up for a similar dramatic reveal. While questioning her he brings up the subject of magnets,

I. – 'You are aware of the effects ascribed by Baron Reichenbach to magnets?'

Medium. – 'Yes; but a magnet makes me terribly ill.'

I. – 'Am I to understand that, if this room were perfectly dark, you could tell whether it contained a magnet, without being informed of the fact?'

Medium. – 'I should know of its presence on entering the room.'

I. – 'How?'

Medium. – 'I should be rendered instantly ill.'

I. – 'How do you feel to-day?'

Medium. – 'Particularly well; I have not been so well for months.'

I. – 'Then, may I ask you whether there is, at the present moment, a magnet in my possession?'

The young lady looked at me, blushed, and stammered,

'No; I am not *en rapport* with you'

I sat at her right hand, and a left-hand pocket, within six inches of her person, contained a magnet.

Our host here deprecated discussion, as it 'exhausted the medium.' (471-72)

In the above exchange Tyndall, purporting to be engaged in objective scientific observation and questioning knowingly sets up the medium in order to make a fool of her in front of the others. What is more, assuming we are to believe that he actually had a magnet in his pocket – from his account it seems that the dramatic reveal takes place only in this essay – this means he planned his attack prior to attending the séance, which is at

odds with his earlier insistence that “Absolute unbelief in the facts was by no means my condition of mind” (469). Perhaps then it was just partial unbelief that informed the premeditated placement of a magnet on his person. However, the act seems more indicative of skeptical bad faith than an open mind. The choice of debunker object is also significant here: Tyndall initially made his name as a scientist in the field of diamagnetism (the property of materials where they are repelled⁹⁹ by a magnetic field). Therefore, the object with which he challenged the medium was one on which he possessed a particular expertise – hardly an even playing field.

The medium – who has been invited to the dinner party/séance under the auspices of her *own* expertise with spirits – was clearly flustered and embarrassed by Tyndall’s demonstration. This does not seem to have been lost on Tyndall, who in commenting on her blushing (just as he did previously with X.) and stammering frames her as both inarticulate and potentially aware of her deception. And yet, Tyndall is not content to merely take note of this observation and file it away with the other “evidence” he was purportedly at the séance to collect. It is the host who, reading the uncomfortable scene, intervenes on the medium’s behalf.

At this point, by his recollection at least, Tyndall seems to have made up his mind regarding the veracity of the events he was witnessing. He then switches to a debunker tactic that is common with scientists attempting to debunk religious belief: recounting some of the “miraculous” and awe-inspiring things that have been proven by science. In fact, it is this very premise around which famous evolutionary biologist and debunker Richard Dawkins structures his 1998 book *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*. The title of the book references the Romantic poet Keats’

charge that Newton had robbed the rainbow of its poetry by demonstrating that white light could be separated into colours using a prism. To this, Dawkins argues, “The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable” and, “the heart of any poet worthy of the title Romantic could not fail to leap up if he beheld the universe of Einstein, Hubble, and Hawking” (x).¹⁰⁰

This does not appear to be an actual rhetorical device aimed at changing anyone’s mind. The intention is to point out that one needn’t look to the supernatural to experience or appreciate the wonder of life and the universe. However, the interaction smacks more of smugness than genuine desire to educate or change someone’s mind, Tyndall recounts,

The wonderful narratives were resumed; but I had narratives of my own quite as wonderful. These spirits, indeed, seemed clumsy creations, compared with those with which my own researches had made me familiar. I therefore began to match the wonders related to me by other wonders... The medium affirmed that she could see actual waves of light coming from the sun. I retorted that men of science could tell the exact number of waves emitted in a second, and also their exact length. The medium spoke of the performances of the spirits on musical instruments. I said that such performance was gross, in comparison with a kind of music which had been discovered some time previously by a scientific man. Standing at a distance of twenty feet from a jet of gas, he could command the flame to emit a melodious note; it would obey, and continue its song for hours. So loud was the music emitted by the gas –flame, that it might be heard by an assembly of a thousand people. These were acknowledged to be as great marvels as any of those of spiritdom. The spirits were then consulted, and I was pronounced to be a first-class medium. (472)

In this exchange Tyndall continuously attempts to one-up the Spiritualist’s observations, as if communicating, ‘If you think that is impressive, wait till you hear what I have got to say!’ There is also a sense that he is making fun of the Spiritualists to their faces and enjoying the fact that they do not seem to understand that – egging them on to tell what he clearly believes to be lies, and matching each one with something provable by science. He is setting them up in this way – presenting himself as a participant in the séance, while

simultaneously undermining them. He comes across as someone content in his own cleverness. Of course, this being Tyndall's recounting of the séance, we must question the veracity of his retelling, or if there was some editorializing after the fact for him to present himself in this way. Surely, had she the opportunity to publish a book, the Medium would have had a different recounting of the exchange. The way Tyndall ends the description of this interaction is also significant. By performing his scientific knowledge and duly impressing the members of the séance, they declare Tyndall himself a Medium. Tyndall winkingly shares this with the reader as if to say, 'I am clearly not a Medium and nevertheless was identified as one,' pointing to the credulousness of the spiritualist believers.

Tyndall's Final Word

Towards the end of the essay Tyndall repeats another common debunker refrain – a supposed pessimism for the future of our species that has been induced by the apparent stupidity of those around him. He bemoans, “a feeling of despair as regards the prospects of humanity never before experienced” (476). Tyndall continues,

This, then, is the result of an attempt made by a scientific man to look into these spiritual phenomena. It is not encouraging; and for this reason. The present promoters of spiritual phenomena divide themselves into two classes, one of which needs no demonstration, while the other is beyond the reach of proof. The victims like to believe, and they do not like to be undeceived. Science is perfectly powerless in the presence of this frame of mind. It is, moreover, a state perfectly compatible with extreme intellectual subtlety and a capacity for devising hypotheses which only require the hardihood engendered by strong conviction, or callous mendacity, to render them impregnable. (476-77)

This, then, is the final word by a scientific man: do not bother; it is not worth our efforts to try and change their minds. It is interesting however, that a man of science does not

adhere to the scientific principles which he holds so high. With one small (and therefore arguably statistically insignificant) sample, he has made up his mind. There is no need to repeat the experiment when the conclusions you have reached so conveniently validate your worldview. Tyndall rightly assesses that the Spiritualists *want to believe*. That is, their belief is serving an important function in their lives. However, Tyndall seems uninterested in this, seemingly foundational, element of Spiritualism (and indeed, spirituality more generally). Instead, he casts the believers as both unintelligent (“extreme intellectual subtlety”) and victims, stripping them of their agency.

In an interesting move Tyndall, a man who spent much of his life evangelizing science in opposition to institutionalized religion and theology, ends his essay with a reference to scripture. He writes,

You urge, in vain, that science has given us all the knowledge of the universe which we now possess, while spiritualism has added nothing to that knowledge. The drugged soul is beyond the reach of reason. *It is in vain that imposters are exposed, and the special demon cast out. He has but slightly to change his shape, return to his house, and find it ‘empty, swept, and garnished.’* (Tyndall 477, emphasis mine)

The “empty, swept, and garnished” refers to Matthew 12:44. The bible passage states that when a demon is cast out of a person, it can return to find the soul ‘empty, swept, and garnished’ and along with seven other demons, re-inhabit the soul leaving the person worse off than they had been before (*Authorized King James Version*, Matt. 12.44). In other words, once belief in a demon is cast out, if God does not come to supplant it and fill the spiritual vacuum left behind (i.e. the want or need to believe) they are primed to be “taken in” by another nefarious belief system. It seems particularly interesting for Tyndall, a man who rallied against religion, to use a passage from scripture in support of his supposed scientific argument. He appears to be both attempting to use believer’s

words against themselves and also, somewhat dramatically, drawing a parallel between Spiritualist and religious belief. To Tyndall, the scientific evangelizer, Spiritualism and religion are of the same, if not demonic, then certainly mistaken belief system. He seems to be observing the futility of casting religious belief out, only for it to be supplanted by another pseudo-spiritual belief system. It is telling that in Tyndall's reformulation of the scripture the spiritually and morally righteous position of God is transferred to science.

Tyndall's position can be understood by what would have been a familiar dynamic over the course of the nineteenth century in Europe and North America: the previously untouchable status of the church and religion in society was slowly being challenged and eroded. As both a prominent scientist and science communicator, Tyndall was on the frontlines of that effort. And yet, not everyone's need for meaning could be satisfied by the "wonders" to be found in the natural sciences or natural law. Into that spiritual vacuum sprang up a number of late nineteenth century opportunities for belief: Spiritualism, but also Theosophy, Animal Magnetism (also known as Mesmerism), and too many other occult groups to name. In lumping Spiritualism and religion together Tyndall also appears to signal a fatigue in answering to/debunking religious belief.

Tyndall's position at the end of the essay is that carefully formulated scientific arguments do not stand a chance in the face of fervently held spiritual beliefs. In one sense, he seems to understand that he and the Spiritualists are having fundamentally different conversations, so to speak. However, in asserting, "*Science is perfectly powerless in the presence of this frame of mind,*" Tyndall, perhaps unintentionally, invalidates the debunker position. If, as he writes, "The Drugged soul is beyond the reach of reason" and "It is in vain that imposters are exposed"¹⁰¹ what then is the point of being

a debunker? And moreover, who are these debunker performances for? It is impossible to speak to the motivations of all who engage in this type of rhetoric, but the sincere concern for the wellbeing of others and the desire to perform supposedly morally superior intelligence are not mutually exclusive.¹⁰² How, then, do debunker performances tell us more about the debunker themselves and how they would like to be perceived, than the content of their arguments? Here, a question of extreme relevance for science communicators: how are you communicating your message? Who are you alienating along the way? How do your own biases show up in your performances?

Is the arrogant, gleeful, smug position of the debunker a knowing wink towards an audience who does not need to be won over, but rather entertained? Evidence of how and where some of these debunker performances played out certainly seem to point to this conclusion. Case in point: the *Scientific American* contest of the 1920s. After falling out of fashion around the turn of the twentieth century, Spiritualism saw a major resurgence in popularity during the 1920s. Populations in Europe and the Americas that had been devastated by the massive loss of life during WWI and the Global Influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 were newly primed to appreciate a movement that offered the chance to commune with the dead. Spiritualism was widely supported, and in some cases spread by prominent scientists of the day such as Sir Oliver Lodge. In an effort to have his religion validated by science, vocal spiritualist Sir Arthur Conan Doyle proposed a contest to the publishers of the magazine *Scientific American*: to search for a Medium whose powers could be verified by the scientific method. This was in line with the magazine's mission, a part of which "was to demystify the new frontiers of science" (Jaher 221). A team of highly credentialed men was assembled to judge the contest, amongst them professors

affiliated with Harvard, Yale, and MIT, researchers of psychic phenomena, and interestingly, the magician and escape artist Harry Houdini¹⁰³ (76).

The evidentiary authority afforded to material objects was acknowledged by the contest's strict focus on 'physical' mediums. Part of the official contest announcement read, "Purely mental phenomena like telepathy, or purely auditory ones like rappings, will not be eligible for this award. The contest does not revolve about the psychological or religious aspects of the phenomena, but has to do only with genuineness and objective reality" (82). The *Scientific American* panel realized that not only could physical manifestations be tested according to the scientific method, but they also held more interest for the general public. In the end, no psychic was ever awarded the \$5000 prize being offered – the person to come closest, Mina "Margery" Crawford, was declared a fraud by the committee in 1925 (323).

Conclusion

Science, since the enlightenment, has attempted to uncover objective truths about the natural world through empirical observation and research. However, as feminist historians of science have noted, assumptions around gender, sexuality, race, and class have always been a part of the discipline. As Evelyn Fox Keller writes,

To know the history of science is to recognize the mortality of any claim to universal truth. Every past vision of scientific truth, every model of natural phenomena, has proved in time to be more limited than its adherents claimed. The survival of productive difference in science requires that we put all claims for intellectual hegemony in their proper place – that we understand that such claims are, by their very nature, political rather than scientific. (178-9)

Throughout this chapter I have drawn on the work of historians of science to show how masculinity and science were conflated during the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the image of the scientist as we know it today was in the process of being constructed. I have argued that the performance of heroic hypermasculinity, typified by the mountain climbing Tyndall, is an important element of nineteenth century scientists, who sought to distance themselves from “lesser” beings such as women, racialized subjects, and the lower classes. This image construction lent authority to scientists as a profession, and contributed to the knowledge production and truth claims that would put them in opposition to more feminized forms of knowing, exemplified in Spiritualist performers. However, the act of debunking requires a type of theatricality that in some ways feminizes the scientist subject, which is anathema to their goals if we are to understand theatricality as being something they wanted to distance themselves from.

In this chapter I continued my analysis of John Tyndall through the lens of debunker discourse by performing a close reading of his 1864 essay “Science and Spirits.” In recounting his experience as the invited guest and investigator at a séance, Tyndall performed many key characteristics of debunker discourse. Among them: questioning the authority and/or intelligence of the Spiritualists and Medium through less than objective means, staging dramatic “reveals” wherein he purportedly bested his opponents, and using the belief (and therefore stupidity) of the Spiritualists to make pessimistic predictions for humanity. What is particularly interesting about Tyndall’s piece is the closing note; in stating the futility of trying to challenge fervently held spiritual beliefs, he inadvertently undermines his own debunker position. This raises a number of questions about debunker performance, chief amongst them: who is it for?

In the following chapter I will build on this work by continuing to complicate the assumed boundaries between masculinity/antitheatricality/science/objectivity/reason and femininity/theatricality/Spiritualism/subjectivity/emotion. It is my assertion that from this perspective we can understand Spiritualists and debunkers as engaging in similar performative practices to communicate their ideas and engender meaningful belief. If, as I have shown, theatricality is associated with femininity and therefore an undesirable trait then scientists were unwittingly performing a type of femininity in their highly theatrical debunking performances. A parallel can be drawn here to performance scholar Amelia Jones' reading of postmodern art star Jackson Pollock – how the hyper performance of masculinity flips into a hyper theatricality that undoes its supposed virility and naturalness.

In the following chapter I look at specific examples of scientist and spiritualist co-performances during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The agnosticism of the Scientific Naturalists, and the shift from a theistic to scientific worldview during the latter half of the nineteenth century is important context for understanding the scientist vs. Spiritualist dynamic. For, during the very period that the Scientific Naturalists were changing internal scientific debates and shaping the public perception of science, Spiritualism was gaining traction as an immensely popular form of both entertainment and, to some, meaningful belief – therefore questioning the notion that Scientific Naturalism was widely accepted. The aggressive performances of the Scientific Naturalists are connected to debunker discourse and in the following chapter I uncover further examples of the heroic men of science behaving theatrically, acting as “drama queens” and being, some might say, *too much*.

Historical Borderlands

Historians spend a lot of time in the Borderlands. They traverse past and present, attempting to hold both at once in order to produce meaning, all the while knowing that meanings are always multiple and subject to contestation. The archives in particular are a Borderland space, where the ephemera of the past is collected, waiting to be re-discovered and brought into the present. There is magic and great potential in these spaces where one can literally touch the past. To write a dissertation is to spend extended time in the Borderlands. The not-quite-thereness of it all can produce a period of instability where one exists somewhere in the liminal space between student and teacher, often for years on end. To emerge out the other side – of financial precarity, endless drafts, and self-doubt – is to take a step out of the Borderlands and into the certainty of expertise.

*On the other hand, from the empiricists who aim to counter the unease of the Borderlands are those who claim another type of specialized access to the space: the mediators, priest(esses), oracles, and Mediums. This is the promise of Spiritualism: that it is possible to transcend firm boundaries like life/death in order to communicate with those on the other side. The Medium, like the historian, is a vessel for the dead, and they embody a tantalizing promise to reunite loved ones with those they have lost. From 1893-1897 the notorious newspaperman William Thomas Stead (known for his vivid and sensational style) published the periodical *Borderland*. Amongst articles on crystal gazing, palmistry, hypnotism, astrology, and theosophy Stead defined his mission:*

BORDERLAND? Of what? Of “the immense ocean of Truth” which Sir Isaac Newton saw lying unexplored before him. In what spirit is it to be explored? In the spirit of the principle laid down by Professor Huxley as the fundamental axiom of modern Science, “to try all things, and to hold fast by which is good.” It is the Method of the Agnostic applied vigorously to the phenomena of the religion which has hitherto been relegated to Superstition.¹

Stead, like many Spiritualists of the day, wanted to collapse the binary of science/séance while simultaneously holding both belief and certitude. It seems, then, that the Borderlands can be an uncomfortable place, even for those who purport to traverse it.

¹ Stead, William Thomas. *Borderland: A Quarterly Review and Index*. Vol. 1 Issue 1, 1893, p. 3.

Chapter 3

Pussy as Proscenium: The Explicit Body Performances of Kathleen Goligher

“In all such phenomena [of the physical order], a substance which we may call 'plasma' issues from the body of the medium... A problem such as the following might arise: From what part of the medium's body does the plasma issue...?” (Crawford 147)

Introduction

In this chapter I think through issues of performance and embodiment by examining the explicit body performances of Spiritualist Medium Kathleen Goligher (1898-1972). Physical Mediumship was a deeply embodied practice whereby ectoplasm – understood amongst Spiritualist believers to be the physical embodiment of spirits – was produced from within the body of the Medium, spilling out of their orifices. I am particularly interested in the female Mediums, like Kathleen, who made canny use of the “offstage” space of their vaginas in their performances of physical Mediumship. They were able to use their anatomy to their advantage, and in doing so invoked various layers of meaning around female/AFAB sexuality and bodily processes as they were understood in the nineteenth century, and which continue to be relevant.

The star of this chapter is Kathleen Goligher (Fig. 21), a young blouse cutter from Belfast who rose to fame in the early twentieth century for her role as a Medium in her family’s séance circles held from 1913-1921.¹⁰⁴ The world learned about Goligher and her amazing abilities through the works of William Jackson Crawford, a local scientist who undertook years of experiments with the family and published three books on the subject. Crawford seems to have taken a particular shine to the young Kathleen (whose age ranged from approximately sixteen to twenty two during their period working



MISS KATHLEEN GOLIGHER.
THE MEDIUM IN DR. CRAWFORD'S
CÉLÉBRATED EXPERIMENTS.

Photo. Abernethy's Studios, Belfast.

Fig. 21. “Miss Kathleen Goligher. The medium in Dr. Crawford's celebrated experiments. Photo. Abernethy's Studios, Belfast.” Public domain, via The Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopaedia.

together) and championed her abilities. The Goligher séances were a family business (in more than one sense – it was customary for séance participants to pay for entry)¹⁰⁵, however it appears that both Crawford and the Goligher family understood that Kathleen was the main draw.

In this chapter I provide a theatrical close reading of William J. Crawford's account of his research with Goligher. I interpret his text as a kind of burlesque performance in order to explore how Spiritualist performances variously engaged with the explicit body. In doing so I build on the work of Performance Studies scholar Rebecca Schneider, who, “coined the phrase ‘explicit body’ as a means of addressing the ways [feminist performance art] aims to explicate bodies in social relation.” Schneider

leans into the dual nature of the term explicit, as referring not only graphic sexuality, but also to the act of “explicating” – providing a detailed analysis. Schneider invokes a connection to the spirit realm when she writes of artists, “Unfolding the body, as if pulling back velvet curtains to expose a stage... peel[ing] back layers of signification that surround their bodies like ghosts at a grave” (2). In this chapter the curtains I discuss and peel back are both signification and flesh: Goligher’s performance involved an explicitly sexualized part of the body, her vagina. The layers of signification surrounding Goligher’s body, and the concept of the “female” body itself, contributed to confusion on the part of Crawford – something he sought to rectify through his experiments. Reading Crawford’s research dramaturgically serves to highlight the sexuality of séance performances, and in particular the power dynamics of investigator/scientist and Medium/performer. It also introduces the opportunity for a reading that centres pleasure.

In order to contextualize the significance of Mediumistic explicit body performances¹⁰⁶ I return to some of the ideas I introduced in Chapter 1. The vagina –entry point to the uterus, portal of life and death – can be understood as the embodied site of patriarchal fear and distrust. By incorporating her vaginal space into her performances, Goligher invoked this loaded cultural history and framing. Male fear and confusion over the female body provided the grounding to make this the ideal hiding spot – did the predominantly male debunkers dare to question or even *name* what they may have suspected was going on? I suggest that in a patriarchal culture – as it existed in the nineteenth century and continues to this day – that foregrounds androcentric sexual pleasure, the mystery of the spirit world is perhaps only equal to the mystery of women’s sexual pleasure, embodied in the vulva/clitoris/vagina. This is an ongoing concern

expressed in the confusion and consternation surrounding female and AFAB anatomy¹⁰⁷ (and not only on the part of men): how many holes are down there?... Where does the pee come from?... Where is the clitoris?... Did you cum?

Goligher's vaginal performances also have an undeniable element of spectacle and show(wo)manship; she was able to perform an amazing feat that enhanced her séances – a one-upping of the classic magician producing something out of his sleeve or hat. Finally, the embodied practices of Mediums and the various ways in which they were examined, detailed, deconstructed, and critiqued by scientific researchers (both Spiritualists and Debunkers) is an exaggerated example of the ways in which, under patriarchy, a women's body is never fully her own. Into this history I attempt to locate Kathleen Goligher's own agency by thinking through some of her potential motivations, providing a deep reading of the metaphors conjured in her performances, and searching for the various ways in which she might have taken pleasure, sexual and otherwise.

Given my focus on the dynamic of Spiritualists being debunked by scientists it feels important to locate my own perspective and “take” on the events I describe and analyse in this chapter. As mentioned in the Introduction to this dissertation, I am not a believer in Spiritualism (or for that matter any belief system in which an afterlife figures). However, my lack of belief in Spiritualism does not translate into a desire, or in fact need, for it to be debunked. I am happy to take Goligher, her family, Crawford, and the other believers at their word, *and* I can very easily imagine the various ways that elements of the séance performances were instances of clever stagecraft. I am comfortable with the ambiguity, which I have tried to maintain in my retelling of the story. Either way, what unfolded over a century ago in Belfast was a product of complex

dynamics including gender, sexuality, authority, the human desire for spirituality and meaning, and the equally human fact of multiple truths existing simultaneously for different people. What is, however, undeniable is Goligher and Crawford's investment and commitment to the work. Their collaboration unfolded over six years, three books, and countless evenings in the séance circle. The primary debunkers of Crawford and the Goligher circle by comparison spent twenty sittings over the course of four months (E.E. Fournier d'Albe) and read one of Crawford's books (Charles Marsh Beadnell) before levelling their critiques. Ultimately it is the suspension of disbelief that allows me to fully appreciate and enjoy the performances of *everyone* involved.

The Goligher circles took place during what was a significant time for Spiritualism. The practice, which had taken hold and risen to widespread popularity as both entertainment fad and meaningful belief system during the 1850s, had begun to wane in fashion by the end of the Victorian era. However, it saw resurgence in the early twentieth century, particularly in the wake of WWI and the 1918-1920 Global Influenza Pandemic (commonly referred to by the misnomer "Spanish Flu" because of erroneous reports that the virus originated in Spain). One of the primary draws of Spiritualism was the promise of communicating with a lost loved-one. Amidst so much death, Spiritualism – with its promise of contacting those beyond the grave – understandably surged in popularity. During this time there was a massive amount of printed material devoted to it (both books and in the periodical press), and Spiritualist Mediums rose to prominence all over Europe and North America. Accordingly, there was a continued and ongoing push on the part of scientists to do two things: devise experiments that could lend evidence to the truth claims of Spiritualists, and/or debunk various Spiritualist performers through

experimental means. In some cases, as with the scientist who would debunk Kathleen Goligher, they set out to provide proof and inadvertently uncovered deception.

Setting the Stage: The Goligher Circle

Much of what we know about Kathleen Goligher's performances as the star of the Goligher Circle comes from the work of William Jackson Crawford (1881-1920) (Fig. 22). Crawford attended séances with the Goligher circle during the period of 1914-1920. He was a fervent believer in and champion of Kathleen Goligher's abilities, and devised countless experiments in order to confirm his belief in Spiritualism and her Mediumship. Crawford authored three books in which he painstakingly reported on his research with Kathleen: *The Reality of Psychic Phenomena* (1916), *Experiments in Psychic Science* (1919), and *The Psychic Structures in the Goligher Circle* (1921). Tragically, on 30 July 1920 Crawford took his own life by ingesting potassium cyanide,¹⁰⁸ leaving behind a wife, four children, and a body of work he no longer could (or had to) defend. The proximity of Crawford's death to a debunker attack is considered later in this chapter, however by all contemporary accounts given it appears that he was exhausted and suffering from insomnia and depression.

William Jackson Crawford was born in the Scottish Presbyterian outpost of Dunedin, New Zealand, the eldest of seven children. By 1901 he had immigrated to Glasgow, where he received his doctorate and met his future wife Elizabeth. William and Elizabeth had three children, and settled in Belfast in 1908 (West "William Jackson Crawford: birth, life, and death"). There, Crawford worked as a Lecturer in Mechanical Engineering at the Belfast Municipal Technical Institute, and extra-mural Lecturer in



Fig. 22. William Jackson Crawford, date unknown. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Mechanical Engineering at Queen’s University of Belfast. This would have afforded the Crawfords a comfortable middle-class life.

The frontispiece to Crawford’s *Reality of Psychic Phenomena* is a portrait of young Kathleen inscribed with the message, “Through whose wonderful physical Mediumship the experiments described in this book were rendered possible” (Fig. 23). Crawford’s fawning dedication – the very first thing in the book – situates Goligher as indispensable to the knowledge creation therein. It is a soft focus, gauzy image of the girl with her frameless glasses perched on her nose, long dark ringlets tumbling over one shoulder, and a faint smile on her lips. She is pretty in a plain way, with a somewhat serious countenance and bow lips. With its soft vignette edges and high key lighting Goligher appears as if she could exist in some ethereal realm – angelic, virginal – perhaps



Fig. 23. The image of Kathleen Goligher included in the front of *Reality of Psychic Phenomena* (1916). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

a nod to her psychical abilities. The sailor collar of her Edwardian blouse reminds us how young she is; Goligher was fifteen or sixteen when Crawford first started attending her family's séances. By opening his book with a photograph of Goligher – a representation – we are reminded that Crawford's account is also a representation of her, and perhaps an idealized one.

Photography is a representation in that the image is not the *actual* subject/object, and involves deliberate choices on the part of the photographer such as framing, exposure, and so on. Photography was also, particularly in this era, more closely aligned with scientific representation and a claim to the real, than an engraving or painting would have been. Crawford's ample use of photographs throughout his books therefore also functions as subtle reinforcement of the scientific basis for the claims produced therein.

There is an interdisciplinary connection between photography, performance, and scientific discovery – all bound together in the notion of the woman’s body as vanishing point, and that which the camera can/cannot see. Rebecca Schneider refers to “ways of seeing which have erected the female body as Prime Signifier of the Vanishing Point... Yet even as she is ubiquitously given to be seen, she simultaneously signifies a flirtatious impossibility of access, a paradoxical ‘reality’ only of dream, of shadow, always beyond reach, always already lost” (5-6). Science is one domain in which this desire to “fix”¹⁰⁹ (as in a photographic image) or pin down the troublesome female body found an outlet.

One of the promises of photography in the latter half of the nineteenth century was the way in which it aided medical and scientific classification. Attempts to make the female body legible through medical pathologization were helped along by cameras – technology that was interpreted as an objective, disinterested eye. In his book *The Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (English translation 2003), Georges Didi-Huberman traces the relationship between the development of photography and the creation of hysteria as a medical category. He writes of Charcot’s use of photography, “It was, in fact, like the original declaration that the ideal of an absolute clinical eye and an absolute memory of forms was on the verge of being realized. Indeed, photography was born at a moment when not only the end of history but the advent of absolute knowledge were awaited” (29-30). So too, with the help of a mechanical “eye,” psychical investigations were bolstered by the supposed evidentiary value of the indexical image. In the context of Spiritualism, “spirit photography” became a popular practice in which images of the deceased, or other

spiritual entities, were captured (often through dark room tricks such as double exposure).¹¹⁰

Though she would become known as the primary draw, Kathleen Goligher's performances as a part of the Goligher circle were very much a family affair. The circle included her father, brother, three older sisters, and brother-in-law. Spiritualism was the family's religion, and all members were said to be practicing Mediums of varying skill. It was, however, young Kathleen who showed the greatest promise and seemed to have most inherited the psychic abilities that were said to run on her mother's side (Crawford, *Reality of Psychic Phenomena* 2). Kathleen was the fourth child of George and Annie Goligher, preceded by her older sisters Rebecca Morrison (née Goligher, b. 1891), Lily Goligher (b. 1893), Anna Goligher (b. 1895) and younger brother Samuel (b. 1902). Kathleen's mother Annie is listed on the 1901 and 1911 Belfast census but is curiously absent from Crawford's books. Despite her purported psychic abilities she apparently did not participate in the family séances and is only given brief mention in E.E. Fournier d'Albe's 1922 book on the family, in which d'Albe reports that she was sick at the time. Samuel Morrison, who was married to the eldest Goligher daughter Rebecca, was by Crawford's account a strong presence in the circle – acting as something akin to a stage manager or producer. Crawford writes that Morrison had strong connections to the Spiritualist Church in Belfast, and was, “a member of the Committee, and works hard in the interests of the Society” (Crawford, *Reality of Psychic Phenomena* 2).

The Goligher family lived a humble, working class existence. Public records indicate that the family moved seven times between Kathleen's birth in 1898 and the time of their séances with Crawford. During the period of the séances it appears that all of the

Goligher siblings, except for Rebecca, lived at home in what would have been the relatively tight conditions of Victorian working-class housing for a family of six. George Goligher worked in Belfast's textile industry as a shirt and collar cutter, as did at least two of his daughters, Anna and Kathleen, who both worked as blouse cutters (see Fig. 24 for an image of a similar factory in nearby Derry). It was not uncommon at the time for young women in Northern Ireland to work outside of the home in order to help support the family. In her article "The Dangers and Temptations of the Street: Managing female behaviour in Belfast during the First World War" historian Leanne McCormick notes that by the end of the nineteenth century Belfast was both the only industrialized part of Ireland (its major industries being shipbuilding and textiles, in particular the linen industry) and a "women's city" where over one-quarter of households were headed by women (415). She writes, "In Belfast, as in many other cities, anxieties about women working in factory conditions had long been



Fig. 24. Cutting room of the City Factory on Queen Street, Derry, Northern Ireland circa 1919, photographer unknown. Public domain, uploaded to Facebook by Joseph Keys.

a concern for the authorities, both governmental and religious. Factory work in particular was seen as damaging for both bodies and minds, as girls, it was felt, were exposed to the ‘low tone’ of a factory floor” (McCormick 416).

There is no information available on when Kathleen stopped working in the textile factories as a blouse cutter. If she did continue her factory work during the period of the Goligher circle’s séances, her participation in them, and in particular her role as the star Medium could have been beneficial to her – and by extension her family’s – social standing. A topic of concern amongst early twentieth century Belfast religious, and social institutions was the fact that after working their long, 12-hour factory shifts young women (understandably) poured out into the streets (Fig. 25) seeking fun and entertainment at such “dangerous” and “inappropriate” places as public houses, music halls, and cinemas (McCormick 417). By spending her evenings in the séance space of the family home – doing something as important as assisting a scientific researcher no



Fig. 25. View of High Street, Belfast looking east, circa 1906. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

less – Kathleen would have avoided the patronizing “woman patrols” that roamed the Belfast streets in order to “save” young women from the dangers of city life (and presumably, their own desires) (McCormick 421).

The séances, for the most part, took part in the Goligher home though sometimes Crawford convened them in his own parlour or in the house of a friend (Crawford, *Reality of Psychic Phenomena* 2). In his first book on the Golighers Crawford describes the scene:

The floor of the room is bare. Each member of the circle possesses a special wooden chair and sits on no other (except on special occasions when I altered the arrangement). Besides the chairs the only other furniture in the room consists of the seance table and a few ornaments on the mantelpiece (except of course when I brought in apparatus)... For the general purpose of lighting the seance chamber, a gas jet enclosed in a lantern having a red glass sliding front and side is used... The seance is opened with the singing of a hymn and a prayer. In a few minutes light raps are usually heard near the medium, which quickly increase in intensity. Within a quarter of an hour most of the phenomena are often in full swing. A hymn is sung occasionally during the course of the seance. The sitting is closed by prayer. The method of conducting the circle is as simple as possible. The members simply sit round in approximately circle formation and clasp each other's hands in chain order. The seance table is placed on the floor within the circle. (5-6)

The Goligher's attic was kept as a dedicated séance space, which given the family's large size and tight living quarters, speaks to how important the practice and their faith was to them. There is no record of the frequency or number of séances held by the circle, but given the extensive data contained within Crawford's books it seems safe to assume it was in the hundreds. Crawford writes “A great many people have been invited to visit the circle and witness the phenomena” and mentions at times the participation of various unnamed friends as well as his wife Elizabeth (69, 14).

Physical Mediumship: The Burden of Proof

Despite, or perhaps because of Spiritualism's focus on non-corporeal entities, objects played an important role in séance performances. They featured prominently as props, set design, and perhaps most crucially, evidence. Séances frequently involved record players, spirit trumpets, lights, spirit cabinets, and of course tables – which were not only an integral part of the physical gathering of séances, but also used to create rappings and levitations.¹¹¹ Spiritualist performers generally fell into one of two camps: 'mental' mediums – those who channelled spirits through noises, voices, rapping, etc. – and 'physical' mediums who produced physical objects referred to as spirit matter. Towards the end of the nineteenth century Victorian audiences who felt that seeing was believing were more interested in the phenomena of physical Mediums (Fig. 26), and as theatre historian Amy Lehman notes, "mediums trying to satisfy audience demands for physical proofs found themselves obliged to produce *matter* as evidence of *spirit*" (16). Despite the seeming contradiction between spectral beings and materiality, "[Victorian audiences'] confidence that sensory evidence like sight, touch and hearing did not lie made it easier for them to accept the truths of the physical phenomena and spirit materializations of trance performances" (Lehman 168).

Mediums produced physical proof of their otherworldly abilities through ectoplasm, automatic writing, and spirit photographs (and it should be noted, these materials were all used at various times to refute the claims of mediums as well). Spiritualists extended their understanding of materiality to the spirit realm, and believed the ethereal body was composed of 'spirit matter' – a claim they took from science. As Alex Owen notes,



Fig. 26. “Spiritualism Made Useful” from *Punch’s Almanac for 1877*. The cartoon skewers mental Mediumship, depicting a dinner party being served by spirits, who also provide musical accompaniment. Public domain, via The Internet Archive.

‘Spirit matter’ is an interesting juxtaposition which might be regarded as an attempt to reconcile the apparent dichotomy between the material and the spiritual, but it was rarely viewed in this light. As far as spiritualists were concerned, it was a concept that made sense, and they soon presented it as evidence of a hitherto unknown universal element. This was actually less odd than it might seem, for throughout the [nineteenth] century scientists were continuing to push back the boundaries of what was known about matter. Positivistic science was confident that it could identify the laws by which the universe was regulated, and spiritualists saw no reason why their own experiences should not go to prove the existence of a new element and a new law. (vi)

Spirit matter such as ectoplasm helped strengthen the devout belief of Spiritualists and the authenticity of Mediums. Their séance performances were designed to not only dazzle or entertain, but crucially, to impart belief to the audience – to convince them of the truth and materiality of the spirit world. In this case matter takes on an important function as *proof*. It is useful here to consider the legal value afforded to material evidence. Physical

evidence is relied upon in courts of law¹¹² to bolster the claims made by people – both witness or defendant – and is generally given greater consideration than eyewitness testimony and memory, which is largely understood to be fallible. In short, material evidence has a higher claim to the truth. When being asked to believe, people like something they can *physically* apprehend (in spite of our post-modern understanding of the differences in perception). During the latter half of the nineteenth century the physical and visual were privileged in scientific and Spiritualist performances. But as with science, the authoritative claim inherent in materiality could also have the opposite of the intended effect. Mediums who produced spirit matter inadvertently provided materials to be scrutinized and debunked by disbelievers; damned if they did, damned if they did not.

Medium's performances were never separate from the need to provide evidence. This burden of proof was a key part of Spiritualist discourse, reflected in Crawford's passionate defenses of Goligher. In reading Spiritualist accounts it is clear that the authors had a keen awareness of people's disbelief and thus took a rhetorically defensive position. Crawford himself went to great lengths to attest to the morality – and therefore truthfulness – of all involved in the Goligher circle. He writes, "The medium and her family are upright, religious-minded people, who keep to a high moral standard in their daily lives. Each and every one of them is incapable of any wrong action with regard to the ordinary affairs of life" (Crawford, *Reality of Psychic Phenomena* 11). He repeatedly emphasized the fact that the Golighers did not accept money, dispelling any suggestion that the family was participating in a scheme motivated by financial gain (Crawford, *Reality of Psychic Phenomena* 4, 6, 21)¹¹³. The defensive position, veering often into the domain of protesting too much, speaks to the heightened awareness on behalf of

Spiritualists that proving their beliefs was an uphill battle. This adds an additional dimension to the performances they devised –which, I suggest, often went to extremes in anticipation of a potentially unsympathetic audience.

Kathleen Goligher was known for producing both mental and physical phenomena during her séance performances. After the joining of hands, the singing of a hymn and the saying of a prayer the manifestations would begin. According to Crawford, “In a few minutes light raps are usually heard near the medium, which quickly increase in intensity. Within a quarter of an hour most of the phenomena are often in full swing” (Crawford, *Reality of Psychic Phenomena* 6). “Raps” or knocking sounds were a common way that spirits communicated with the living during séances. Sitters would ask questions of the spirits and then slowly recite the alphabet until a rap was heard, signalling that they had identified the correct letter. In this methodical way sitters would be able to spell out messages from the spirits – an audible version of the Ouija board.¹¹⁴ Crawford described the raps as, “of all degrees of loudness from the slightest taps to blows which might verily be produced by a sledge-hammer” and reported other auditory feats such as imitations of a ball bouncing, a man walking, and a match being struck (*Reality of Psychic Phenomena* 9).

In all of his work with the Goligher circle Crawford never used the term “spirits.” Instead, his preferred word for whoever was communicating through Kathleen was “operators.” Crawford’s use of this term recalls two Victorian inventions – the telegraph (1837) and telephone (1876) – an unsurprising link given both devices’ amazing ability to transmit messages invisibly through time and space. The table rapping of Spiritualists also shared a rudimentary similarity with the language of the telegraph, Morse code. In

this metaphor if the spirits were the “operators” then Kathleen Goligher was the technology of communication itself, the physical apparatus through which the messages could flow. This positions the Medium as both essential to the process and yet prone to being manipulated behind the scenes – or beyond the realm. Operators, after all, are the skilled technicians that possess the ability to control the technologies of communication. In this configuration the Medium is largely a vessel to be used – an interesting paradox of agency/non-agency.

This paradox of agency is perhaps another reason why the physical manifestations of séances became all the more important to establishing proof. If something – or someone – else, was technically controlling a Medium, the objects they left behind could offer valuable evidence. At the Goligher circle physical manifestations often took the form of powerful forces that could lift and levitate a table. The engineering minded Crawford hypothesized that physical cantilevers – what he referred to as psychic beams – would extend from the body of the Medium and lift the table (Fig. 27). In an attempt to prove his theory Crawford devised experiments that included: laying out

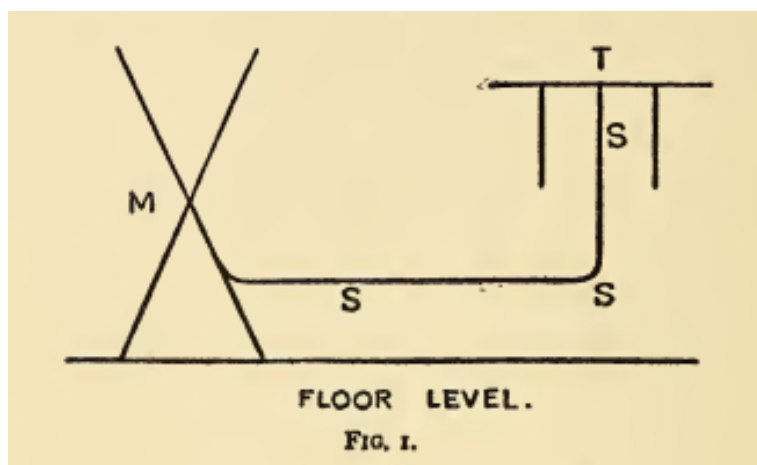


Fig. 27. One of Crawford’s diagrams of his cantilever theory printed in *The Psychic Structures at the Goligher Circle* (1921). His caption indicates, “M is the medium, T the levitated table, S the structure [psychic beam].” Public domain, via The Internet Archive.

dishes of clay under the table (and out of the Medium's reach) to capture impressions of the psychic beams, having the Medium sit in a chair that was placed on a board that sat atop a special weighing machine (Fig. 28) (to see if her weight was altered when the psychic beams were apparently leaving her body), and taking photographs during séances. These photographs captured with the assistance of Seamus Stoupe, head of the Art Department and a colleague of Crawford's at the Belfast Technical Institute, are some of the most compelling objects to come out of Crawford's experiments. From them we get a glimpse at both Kathleen as well as that most interesting of materials she expelled from her body – ectoplasm.

To take Goligher and Crawford at their word is to accept that the material that issued forth from the Medium's body was indeed matter from the spirit realm. However, if Goligher felt, and in turn responded, to the pressure to provide physical evidence this does not automatically make her a fraud. Rather, she was hewing to the expectations put upon Mediums of the day. Presumably a Medium could have an earnest belief in her own spiritual abilities and also understand that a show of materiality would help enhance

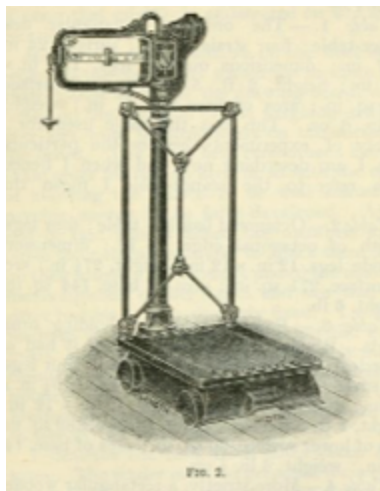


Fig. 28. The platform weighing machine, which Crawford notes was “quite new” and “kindly lent me by Messrs W. & T. Avery, Ltd.” (36). From *The Reality of Psychic Phenomena* (1916). Public domain, via The Internet Archive.

belief in her performances. Goligher's spirit matter reinforced her authority as a Medium. That she was both giving the audience what they wanted and providing a material that would satisfy the scientific process made her all the more an effective performer.

The Medium's Body/The Medium's Voice

There is a tension in the fact that in the majority of cases, the narratives surrounding Mediums – despite being largely centred on their bodies – were not told in their voices. Rather, the people responsible for disseminating their stories were, by and large, participants in the séances. Often these were men of science who were invested in either proving or disproving the veracity of the Medium. However, rather than fall into clear believer/nonbeliever camps, they approached the topic from a variety of positions and motivations: as psychical researchers who believed in Spiritualism, but not always in a particular Medium (fraudulent Mediumship was widespread and acknowledged by Spiritualists who had an investment in both rooting out bad actors *and* proving the existence of true Mediums), as agnostics who did not profess to know either way but wanted to gather more information, and as scientists who did not believe in Spiritualism and were eager to wrest the discipline of science away from such pursuits so as not to tarnish its reputation. Within these categories there was sometimes overlap – for example E.E. Fournier d'Albe, the scientist who would most successfully go on to debunk Kathleen Goligher's abilities as a Medium was a Scientist and a Spiritualist. In all cases it seems that the perceived objectivity of an outside observer lent credibility to Spiritualist investigations.

Despite being the star of the show Goligher is rendered voiceless in Crawford's narrative. He is producer and promoter, but in the act of publishing his research (and the attendant lecture tours and speaking engagements that followed) Crawford effectively took centre stage. The primacy of and preoccupation with Goligher's body makes the lack of her voice all the more startling. Mediums were like ancient Priestesses who gave their bodies over to be conduits for the divine. Though it was the Medium's body that "rendered possible" the communication with the spirit realm, this also means that the performance was in a sense inherently not about them. These performers were not themselves the draw of séances; rather, what (or whom) came through them was. The embodied nature of the performances meant that Medium's bodies were subject to all manner of control and invasive tests. The various ways that their bodies became public property – through demonstration, representation, being written about – parallels the ways in which non-normative bodies are especially subject to surveillance, scrutiny, discussion, and legislation under cis-hetero-colonial-patriarchy. And, if one understands the Medium to also gain financially, the comparison can be extended to sex workers – a connection I make in the final chapter with my discussion of performance artist Annie Sprinkle.

Crawford referred to the spirits summoned by Goligher as "operators," emphasizing the ventriloquism-like nature of the scenario. He was an important part of the Goligher circle itself, facilitating and hosting many of the séances and of course publicizing the findings. Though the spirits came through Goligher, Crawford effectively functioned as her "mouthpiece" by being the agent of her representation. It is clear how Crawford benefitted from the relationship – it brought him (relative) celebrity, and gave

him a platform in the form of books, the regular columns he published in the periodical press, and speaking engagements. It also allowed him to form relationships: with other notable, and powerful, Spiritualists and scientists, and with Kathleen.

Goligher also, apparently, benefitted from their shared work. In Crawford she got an earnest audience member, fawning fan, and ardent defender. Given the gap in skillset between performer and public relations expert, perhaps she thought: why not let him speak for her? Crawford's involvement provided Goligher an association with specialization, expertise, and authority. He was a man, a scientist, a professional, and someone with a higher-class background than hers. New Zealand-born Crawford, who was of Scottish descent, would have also held a degree of racial privilege over Goligher given the anti-Irish British sentiment during the nineteenth century that cast the Irish in racialized terms as lesser beings (Fig. 29). This would have been especially relevant during the years Crawford and Kathleen worked together – a volatile period for Belfast leading up to and during the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921).¹¹⁵ With Northern Ireland separating from the rest of Ireland and aligning itself with Great Britain, the

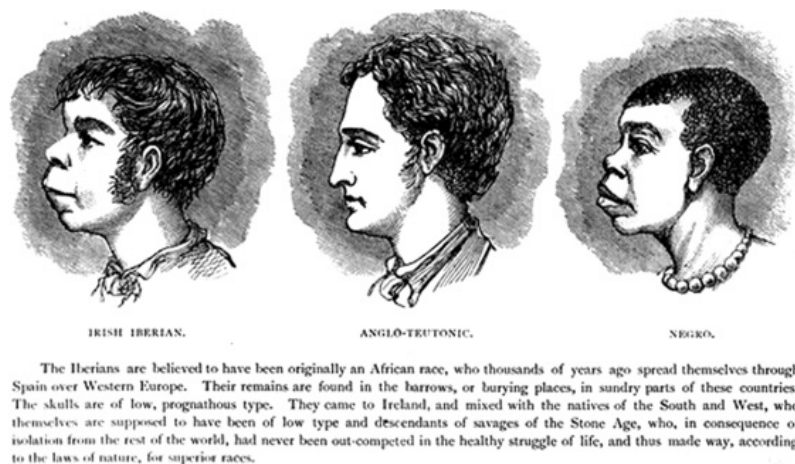


Fig. 29. An illustration from the H. Strickland Constable's *Ireland from One or Two Neglected Points of View* (1899) shows an alleged similarity between "Irish Iberian" and "Negro" features in contrast to the higher "Anglo-Teutonic." Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Golighers similarly aligned themselves with a respectable man of English origin. Perhaps Crawford even saw his work as elevating the Golighers from their Irish origin and casting them in a different light. Despite all of this conjecture, it is a problem that we do not have an account of what Kathleen Goligher herself made of this entire ordeal. What were her intentions, drives, and experiences? Is Crawford a reliable narrator of Goligher's performances, and can any account of a person's body ever be truly reliable when it does not come from them? In considering the performances of Kathleen Goligher through the lens of performance and embodiment I aim to return some more of *her* to the story.

The Explicit Body Performances of Kathleen Goligher

In this section I perform a close reading of the explicit body performances of Kathleen Goligher, as interpreted by Crawford. In doing so I consider the female/AFAB body as theatre, which makes it a threat to antitheatrical patriarchal tradition. In *The Psychic Structures at the Goligher Circle* (1921) Crawford gives an account of Goligher's vaginal ectoplasmic performances – albeit one steeped in propriety and coded language. The book was published posthumously; Crawford took his life in 1920 approximately one month after his final séance with the Goligher circle, and evidently suffering from burnout. The forward to the book includes an excerpt from Crawford's final letter to his friend – and editor of the Spiritualist periodical "Light" – David Gow that was written immediately before his suicide. In the letter Crawford takes pains to distance his desperate act from his work with Goligher, writing,

My psychic work was all done before the collapse, and is the most perfect work I have done in my life. Everything connected with it is absolutely correct, and will bear every scrutiny. It was done when my brain was working perfectly, and it

could not be responsible for what has occurred...I wish to affirm my belief that the grave does not finish all. (v)

Despite the self-ascribed perfection of the work, for the most part the book is a relatively dry read. There are repetitive, alphabetized accounts of Crawford's experiments and the conditions under which they were performed, and a great deal of space dedicated to engineering diagrams. Much of Crawford's research focused on the mechanics of so-called spirit cantilevers and "psychic beam[s]" (*Psychic Structures* 8) – what he believed to be physical spirit manifestations that emanated from the medium's body and could raise tables, create marks in clay, and move objects. In his exhaustive recounting of the experiments and their conditions Crawford both performs scientific rigour and is careful to note the innovative nature of his work as a vanguard of psychical science. He implores his audience, "The reader will remember that I had to feel my way bit by bit with nothing to guide me. There was not a single signpost on the road" (Crawford, *Psychic Structures* 23).

Crawford's feeling – or perhaps groping – around in the dark of uncharted scientific discovery almost all centred on the body of Kathleen Goligher. Therefore in spite of its dry scientific accounting the book, perhaps unwittingly, also lays bare the sexuality of psychic investigations. At the centre of this is the dynamic of older male investigator/younger female object of investigation. This was true of Crawford and Kathleen Goligher, who was *fifteen* when she started working with him.¹¹⁶ Crawford's previous investigations with the Goligher circle, as recounted in his 1916 and 1919 books, also focused on the young Kathleen's body and its otherworldly abilities. However, in the earlier works he had yet to form a theory about where exactly the plasma was issuing from.

The book can be read through the dramaturgy of a burlesque act: unfolding in a slow and titillating fashion that builds towards a climax where Crawford finally reveals the bodily origin of the ectoplasm.¹¹⁷ It begins all buttoned up, with discussions of methodology and experimental procedures. A reader could easily be forgiven for thinking that Crawford's "plasmic rods" were something quite separate from Goligher's corporeality. From there, Crawford's account slowly moves to her body. He reminds us, "Physical phenomena of the type I am considering are closely connected in their origin with various parts of the human body, and the utmost care is needed in scrupulously and fairly dealing with them" (Crawford, *Psychic Phenomena* 57-58). He focuses on Goligher's feet and leather boots (themselves both common and loaded fetishistic objects) lingering there for what seems like a long time before moving the discussion slowly up her legs to her stockings, her knees, her thighs (Crawford, *Psychic Phenomena* 153). Finally, towards the very end of the book Crawford builds to the reveal: he has ascertained where the ectoplasm is coming from. The first instance of him touching, as it were, however briefly on his hypothesis is steeped in the confounding narrative style he employs in his attempts to take the reader along on his scientific journey. Crawford writes,

The question then arose as to whether there was a flow of plasma from the medium's body down the legs, as well as the flow from the feet upwards, or, indeed, whether the whole of the plasma did not come from the trunk of the medium, flow down the legs and then, in some peculiar manner and for some particular reason connect with the building up of the psychic structures, enter her shoes and fill up the space between stocking and leather. For, after all, it has to be remembered that our feet and legs are only pieces of apparatus to enable us to move about, analogous to the wheels of a cart, and that the great centres of nervous energy and reproductive activity are within the body proper. In order, then, to properly trace the plasma paths up the legs of the medium, and to discover whereabouts in her body they originated, special arrangements were made. (154-55)

Though not exactly a climactic payoff to the journey that has heretofore taken us up the medium's legs and purports to gaze into the abyss of the afterlife, a close reading of this passage reveals a few important details. One, he identifies the plasma as probably emanating from the "trunk" of Goligher's body, an area known to have various holes/portals from the inside to the out. In his use of the phrase "the great centres of nervous energy and reproductive activity" Crawford also enters into gendered discourse. "Reproductive activity," of course, invokes the spectre of female creationism and "nervous energy" sounds like a late Victorian/early twentieth century account of women's sexuality. Remember here the connection between the diagnosis of hysteria as a "nervous" disorder and the attendant treatment, which often involved a doctor bringing a female patient to orgasm. Perhaps the greatest payoff for all of this teasing is the switch from technical writing to scopophilic pleasure. The final entries in the book are photographs, allowing the reader to see Goligher's body for themselves after it has been described in minute detail.

Lending itself to the reading of psychic investigations as sexually charged spaces – dim red lighting, the clasping of hands and fumbling in the dark – is the fact that Crawford's account can be read through the lens of fetish and kink. There is much talk of bondage and, as previously mentioned, an extraordinary amount of time spent focusing on Goligher's feet (Fig. 30). Crawford includes descriptions of buying special stockings for Kathleen to wear (as a control) and how he himself laced her up in high leather boots. The binding and constraining of a medium's body were common practices in psychical investigations. This was generally framed as a scientific control, but was also an attempt



Fig. 30. A photograph of Goligher's stocking foot. *Psychic Structures* (1921) includes thirty-three photographs that feature Goligher's feet and shoes. Public domain, via The Internet Archive.

to prevent deception on the part of the medium. In *Psychic Structures* Crawford describes himself tying up Goligher,

when the medium had seated herself on her chair, I tied her ankles together very tightly with fine strong whipcord, using two or three separate pieces of cord; then I tied her ankles to the back bar under her chair... The strings and knots were always found intact at the end of the séance. Indeed, it usually took me five minutes or more to get her untied, and oftener than not the strings had to be cut. (39)

Here it is also interesting to consider the language of control as both an essential part of the scientific method and what underpins the dynamic of D/s (Dominance/submission) sexual relationships in BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism). In scientific experimentation a control is an element that remains unchanged by different variables so as to provide a standard of comparison. In a D/s relationship control is the dynamic being played with – the power of one person over another – towards sexual gratification (“Glossary of BDSM”). In Thomas S. Weinberg's

article “Sadomasochism and the Social Sciences: A Review of the Sociological and Social Psychological Literature” he describes, “The essence of SM, [as] the ritualization of dominance and submission,” and describes it in theatrical terms, writing, “Frequently, sadomasochistic scenarios are scripted; individuals play designated roles during their interaction” (33). The performance aspects of BDSM are also echoed in the use of the term “play” to describe the various activities undertaken.¹¹⁸ As in BDSM scenes, it might appear as if the dominant (in this case Crawford, the investigator) is in control, however the scene is really playing out according to the specifications of the subordinate (Goligher/the spirits). Mediums, including Goligher, were well known for halting séances if the conditions were wrong or often, when performing for skeptics, if their boundaries were crossed. This can be read as the corollary to invoking one’s safe word and calling off a scene. In their review of literature on consent in BDSM, Cara R. Dunkley and Lori A. Brotto explain, “The use of a safe word overrides any power dynamics and typically signals the wish to terminate activity and a withdrawal of consent” (664). An example of Goligher/the spirits withdrawing consent is when, during an investigation by the debunker Fournier d’Albe on June 20, 1921 the spirits reportedly stopped a séance after being asked if anything was wrong (answer through raps: “Yes”) and proceeded to communicate, through raps, “We think it better to not sit further tonight” (Fournier d’Albe 26).

At multiple points in the book Crawford gestures to the concept of consent, assuring his reader, “It is to be remembered that the medium and members of the circle were just as interested as I was, and that they readily assented to anything I proposed in order to render the results as certain as possible and beyond any reasonable suspicion of

doubt” (*Psychic Structures* 38-39). This disclaimer of sorts can be read in a number of ways. On the one hand Crawford is declaring the Goligher’s, and in particular Kathleen’s, willingness to participate in his experiments, submitting, in his own words, “with a reasonable spirit and good humour to nights of trouble and inconvenience” (*Psychic Structures* 65). It appears that Crawford interpreted these acts, which went above and beyond mere cooperation, to be evidence of the Medium’s true abilities. It meant she was as invested as he was in proving, as he wrote, “a psychic problem which, if it had remained unsolved, might have placed the totally false stigma of fraud upon the medium—at least in the estimation of persons who fail to understand the close connection between the body of the medium and physical phenomena in general” (Crawford, *Psychic Structures* 66). From the position of skeptic or debunker however, the Goligher circle’s tireless cooperation could be read (and at the time was interpreted) as a desire to keep the show going.

Consent of all participants having been established, the real payoff to the curious reader finally comes in the last thirty or so pages of the book. By this point the sexually charged nature of Goligher’s ectoplasmic performance emerges in Crawford’s prose. He notes the Medium’s pulse rising, “evidence of strong rubbing action” that reached to the top of her stockings and how, “when the structure [ectoplasm] returned to her, she gave an involuntary convulsive shudder” (Crawford, *Psychic Structures* 166, 151, 139). He also includes descriptions of himself touching Goligher, feeling around for where the ectoplasm was escaping and re-entering her body. Crawford writes at various points, “I put my hands on the lower part of her back,” “I then placed my hand above the medium’s thighs,” and “I felt the medium’s breasts” (*Psychic Structures* 168, 170). This speaks to

the licence granted to scientific and medical men; experimentation/examination are a few of the contexts under which sexual touch is rendered supposedly benign (and it is important to remember here that Crawford was not a medical doctor, but a doctor of *mechanical engineering*). However, given the fact that this touch happened in the presence of Goligher's family (including her father, brother-in-law, brother, and sisters) and that in performing their séances together the family was a de facto theatre troupe, there are also disturbing corollaries to the many ways in which young people in show business are too often both not protected and actively put in harmful situations by "stage parents."¹¹⁹

It does appear that there was a line that Crawford dared not cross, and in service of maintaining propriety he sometimes enlisted his wife to help with the experiments. One of the tests Crawford had devised to trace the bodily path of the ectoplasm was to use carmine powder, a bright red natural dye. It was the carmine powder, in the entry marked "Experiment HH" that confirmed Crawford's suspicions as to their bodily origins. He writes,

The medium put on white calico knickers [Fig. 31] under my wife's supervision. Carmine powder was placed in her shoes. At the end of the seance it was found that there were carmine paths up to the top of both stockings and then inside the legs of the knickers to the join of the legs. The carmine was mostly up the front towards the inside of the legs, and left coloured bands 2 or 3 in. broad. Thus, as I had suspected for some considerable time, it was abundantly clear that plasma issued from and returned to the body of the medium by way of the trunk. The plasma had in the ordinary way got into the shoes, became coloured with the carmine, and had left the track of its return path to the medium's body. (Crawford 154-156)

Should the reader be left with any doubt in their mind Crawford confirms, through the act of demurring, that the ectoplasm was indeed issuing from Kathleen Goligher's vagina. He writes, "By auxiliary experiments carried out chiefly by the aid of carmine dye (already



Fig. 31. Knickers, women's, white, embroidered, calico, maker unknown, place of production unknown, 1900. © Powerhouse Collection. Purchased 1959. Photograph Emma Bjorndahl. Reproduced with permission.

described), I, by a totally distinct line of investigation, discovered the parts of the medium's body whence the plasma issued. I do not intend to say anything more about this here" (Crawford 173).

Crawford was considerably less coy in his correspondences with David Gow, editor of the well-known Spiritualist periodical *Light*, which published frequent dispatches from the Belfast doctor's experiments with the Golighers. In a letter to Gow dated 13 February 1920 Crawford explained,

the carmine put on inside leg of drawers was found on the drawers, pulled right into the whole space available between her buttocks as she sat on her chair. It was even pulled right round behind the base of spine; showing that the plasma is hidden from external disturbance by being pulled up the leg of the Medium and sequestered in all the available dark space. (Crawford's notes, reproduced in Fournier d'Albe 66-67)

In the last passages of his book Crawford offers the reader one final tease. Before finally providing us with the satisfying visual evidence in the form of the photographs taken

during the séances, he gestures to there being more, writing, “In addition to the photographs shown, I have many others which are scarcely suitable for publication in a popular book” (Crawford, *Psychic Structures* 175).

With this titillating detail Crawford completes his narrative burlesque act. In hinting at the existence of more photographs he inhabits the contradictory roles of tease, censor, and protector of virtue – both Kathleen Goligher’s and the reader’s. The simultaneous giving and withholding is a marked difference from the rest of the book, which lays out the evidence and conditions of Crawford’s experiments in minute detail. This narrative edging acts as an incitement to the reader to use their own imaginations to fill in the blanks and form a picture/fantasy in their own mind about the dark, otherworldly realm from which the ectoplasm issues. It is, in short, sexy. At the same time, Crawford’s coyness signals a reluctance – a brushing up against the unknown and being unable to fully look.

Explicit Body Performance Metaphors

The explicit body performances of Kathleen Goligher invite obvious readings of various vaginal functions and expressions. Menstruation, sex, pregnancy, and birth are all invoked in Goligher’s performances and Crawford’s documentation/accounts of them. Beyond the self-evident theatricality of the séances, Goligher’s use of her own vaginal space in her ectoplasmic projections situate the performances as body-as-theatre. If, as Elin Diamond tells us (see Chapter 1), Plato’s anti-mimetic patriarchal fear can be mapped onto the body through understanding the womb-as-theatre, this is pussy-as-proscenium. Goligher’s long skirts – and lips – are the stage curtains, hiding from view her ectoplasmic co-performer(s) until the show is set to begin. Once the stage is set and

lights dimmed, a rustle can be heard – Crawford tells us that, “During the time [the spirits] emerged, the medium's skirts moved” (136). Goligher’s vagina acts as offstage space – a hiding/holding area with the ectoplasm/spirits waiting in the wings. One can imagine their nervous excitement, peeking through the curtains as they wait for their cue.

The ectoplasm’s status as a wet, and as Crawford describes, “whitish, translucent, nebulous matter [that] is the basis of all psychical phenomena of the physical order” invokes the various secretions that are a fundamental part of vaginal corporeal experience (22). Recall here the fear and disgust, by some, with the *wetness* of female/AFAB sexuality. Perhaps ironically then, it is Crawford’s own intervention by means of his red carmine dye that conjures images of menstruation. The “crimson trace...left upon the clothing and skin, as the plasma retires into the body of the medium” not only directly links the ectoplasm to Goligher’s vagina, but also references the life-giving potential that resides there (Crawford 173). Goligher’s youth – much of her time performing for Crawford happened during her teenage years – is symbolic in that this presumably would have been around the time of her first periods. Ectoplasm was generally understood to be a fine, gauzy woven cloth-like substance. If Goligher had carefully placed it inside of her body it would have been an action that mimicked thousands of years of knowledge passed between women and menstruating people – a sponge, a bit of cloth, artfully placed to make one’s life a little easier.

Goligher’s ectoplasmic performances were also, perhaps literally, dripping in sex. The slickness and wetness of the ectoplasm – a liquid travelling down her leg – is inseparable from a consideration of vaginal pleasure. Penetration was also an integral part of the performances – but critically, it was self-penetration. In this sense Kathleen

Goligher and other explicit body performer Mediums like her are ectoplasmic switches – simultaneously top and bottom, give and a take, the ectoplasm both exiting and returning to their bodies.¹²⁰ By Crawford’s account this entering and exiting was accompanied by something akin to Goligher performing orgasm. He writes, “I was sitting on the right of the medium, and when the structure returned to her, she gave an involuntary convulsive shudder” (Crawford, *Psychic Structures* 139). Orgasm is perhaps one of the best metaphors for the process of bringing forth spirit matter into the realm of the living – a forceful expulsion of a powerful energy from your body (squirting spirits?).¹²¹

Another clear metaphor for Goligher’s vaginal performances is pregnancy and birth. There is the holding of a secret in one’s body (Schneider’s secret/secrete) and the bountiful secretions of the gestating body. Also, like pregnancy, the complex embodied experience of the twist of fear/desire/hope – this thing in my body, will it take? Will it last? Can I pull this off? The creation of a bodily form out of one’s own body is echoed in the performances, especially insofar as the ectoplasm was the supposed physical manifestation of spirits, i.e. their embodiment borne of the Medium’s body.

Pregnant bodies are often understood and represented as vessels. Likewise, the Medium’s body was a channel from the world of the undead, like the unborn, to the land of the living. The Medium’s role as conduit – as literally mediating the interaction between realms – was essential, a correlation to the essential role of the bodies who birth. Mediums/Mothers are essential in the dual senses of essentialism and neededness – it is a role inextricably bound up with women’s subjectivity/perceived role precisely *because* it is considered to be something only women do (a queerer, more expansive understanding of gender and acknowledgement of trans lived experience complicates this). In spite of

their essential role, there is also a particular type of lack of agency in the process – you are the body through which this birthing is going to happen, and yet it is simultaneously not about you – once set in motion, this bringing forth is simply going to happen (you hope – if it is wanted).

According to religious teachings mothers and Mediums both touch the divine and are a tool of the divine. Cis-hetero-patriarchal creation narratives configure the maternal body as a tool of both man and the divine (immaculate conception/Madonna) sidestepping the messiness and pleasure (wetness/Whore) of women’s sexuality. The Medium/Mother’s body has access to a specialized, magical, otherworldly realm. If the womb is a liminal space that exists between life and death, then Mediums engaging in explicit body performances similarly inhabit/invoke this liminality in their use of vaginal threshold spaces. In the act of giving life birthing bodies touch death and brush up against it. The mysterious and miraculous nature surrounding Spiritualist performance and the promise of contacting the dead is perhaps only equalled by the mystery/miracle of birth. The profoundness of some processes and experiences exist outside of epistemology; with all of the scientific understanding in the world, who can say that birth is not magic?

In her explicit body performances, Kathleen Goligher performed birthing.¹²² The labour of the endeavour and the physicality of her performance is emphasized in Crawford’s account: “These armchair critics imagine, for some unexplained reason, that the great and powerful structures which produce the phenomena at the Goligher circle appear magically from nowhere, and that their advent is unheralded by anything in the nature of labour. But experiment shows that nothing could be wider of the mark” (*Psychic Structures* 116). In his use of the term *labour* Crawford invokes birthing, and in

other places he directly refers to it as such, adding, “As a matter of fact, at nearly all séances the noise accompanying the birth pangs of the plasma is distinctly audible” (117). Like a baby, the embodied beings that Goligher brought forth from her vagina had an agentic force all their own and were often temperamental and in need of soothing, liable to stop performing if the conditions of the séance were not just right.

With the pulling back of her vaginal “curtains” Kathleen Goligher performed her own reveal (Fig. 32). As opposed to the “ah-ha!” of the debunker reveal, hers has the spectacular “ta-dah!” of a magician – the trick of having something up one’s sleeve (or dress), of pulling the rabbit out of the hat.¹²³ Cue the ectoplasmic jazz hands.



Fig. 32. The ectoplasmic reveal. Public domain, via Mary Evans Picture Library.

Taking Pleasure

In the previous chapter I wrote about the pleasure evident in debunker performances – the apparent glee with which they unearth fraud and in doing so assert their own intellectual and moral superiority. Given the sexually charged dynamics of the séance circles and the performances of both Mediums and psychic investigators it makes sense to ask: what of the pleasure of the other participants in the Spiritualist performances? Crawford's pleasure seems self-evident to a degree: his lingering over and preoccupation with Kathleen Goligher's body, which his investigations gave him ample licence to not only do but talk about publicly. However, I do not wish to imply that Crawford's interest in Goligher was purely sexual. I believe he had an earnest investment in providing scientific evidence for Spiritualism. And, in this context it is still useful to think about his motivations through the lens of pleasure and desire.

Crawford seems to have taken genuine pleasure in his experiments with the Goligher circle. This is evident in the years he devoted to what was clearly his life's passion – his “most perfect work” – which, it must be remembered, was outside of his paid work as a college lecturer. Part of the pleasure and desire driving Crawford's work was professional ambition, as it undoubtedly was for many psychic investigators. The first person to provide definitive proof of the afterlife and the ability to contact those there would have achieved one of the greatest scientific discoveries of all time. The anticipatory pleasure of being celebrated for such a discovery would have been a potent motivating factor.

While Crawford's desire in this respect is fairly legible, I find it far more interesting to think about the potential pleasure of Kathleen Goligher. After all, she

entered into a long-term project as Crawford's co-performer that spanned her entire adolescence and early adulthood. There is no indication that Kathleen was romantically interested in Crawford, and I also do not get the sense that he was intentionally grooming her for this purpose. However, a close relationship between a man in his thirties and a teenage girl is never without problematic power dynamics. Thinking about Kathleen Goligher's pleasure allows us to consider her agency. How did she derive pleasure from the Mediumistic performances she gave? How did she engage in what Theatre and Performance scholar Stephen J. Bottoms terms "theatre's erotics," which he describes as "the often indefinable, frequently promiscuous pleasures that it offers to both participants and observers" (184)? It is logical to assume that Goligher did take pleasure in the work; otherwise she would have ceased performing at séances (as she eventually would within a year of Crawford's death, and facing criticism from debunkers). For Kathleen, as for all performers, there would have been a pleasure in being watched. A pleasure in being the centre of attention and having your every word and movement held on to, of holding the attention of an older man. Beyond that would have been the pleasure of being believed, and championed by someone like Crawford. She was his star in the same way that Augustine was Charcot's, in both cases an opportunity for the young women to transcend the material conditions of their lower-class lives and be *internationally* recognized for being special and important. To be written about. It would have been intoxicating. Given the embodied nature of Goligher's performances her pleasure may have also been physical. What did it feel like to expel ectoplasm from her vagina, to writhe around on her chair as she worked to bring the material out of her body? Was she wet? Did the

ectoplasm rub against her clitoris as her “spasmodic jerking occur[ed]” (Crawford, *Psychic Phenomena* 242)?

We can also consider that Goligher may have taken a certain pleasure in performing deception. This need not be conflated with malice. If Goligher was indeed putting the ectoplasm into her body, as the debunkings suggest, knowing full well it wasn't really spirit matter, this does not automatically undo her earnest conviction in her performances. To read Goligher's deception through the lens of pleasure when the female body is already subject to multiple layers of signification (for example, always already deceptive) is to radically reframe the act. For Goligher to commit to her embodied acts with conviction is to resist the formulation of women-as-dissemblers, and in the process reclaim of her joy, and indeed, erotics.

Given the widespread awareness of the premium placed on physical Mediumship at that time, and her seeming desire to support Crawford's experiments, Goligher's ectoplasmic projections can also be read as a way of helping along or encouraging existing strongly held belief. They enhanced the efficacy of the performances, and she certainly could have taken pleasure, in effectively performing physical Mediumship. In *Speculative Time: American Literature in an Age of Crisis* (2024)¹²⁴ Paul Crosthwaite, a scholar who works at the intersection of literature and economics, writes about illocutionary versus perlocutionary performativity (i.e. what words/performances do, versus the effect they have on the listener/audience). Building on the work of social studies of finance scholar Ekaterina Svetlova, Crosthwaite discusses the argument that actors effect change through conviction and embodied methods that convince others of truth. Svetlova writes that illocutionary performativity

refers to the production of reality by means of *conventional* speech, [whereas] perlocution draws attention to processes of beliefs' formation by means of theatrical persuasion and conviction (performance)... Perlocution makes things happen by means of theatrical persuasion, convincing staging, and thus, *making believe*... [the] trust-taker stages trustworthiness using various devices and strategies [such as] personal appearance... and voice... By doing so, she *does not provide the audience with any (rational) reasons* [for] belief... but *makes them believe*." (Svetlova qtd. in Crosthwaite 161)

Following Crosthwaite, who extends Svetlova's notion of perlocutionary performativity from economic metaphor back to theatre itself, Goligher (and indeed, other Mediums) can be understood as practicing perlocutionary performatives. That is, not only performing for those who *want to believe*, but in their skill as performers are able to, *make them believe*.

If, following Schechner, "efficacy" in performance is determined by its ability to transform the social world in a tangible way, what does it mean to think about the efficacy of deceptive performances? Goligher's séance performances certainly align with many of Schechner's criteria for efficacy, which he reverently links to ritual and differentiates from the purely "entertainment" [i.e. feminized] quality of theatre (though he does admit to their co-existence, which he conceives of as a braid). In fact, séances seem to check-off everything on the "efficacy" list: "results [emotional connection and validation for mourning families], link to an absent Other [the spirits!], abolishes time, symbolic time [connecting realms is to step outside of linear time], brings Other here [again, spirits], performer possessed, in trance [the Medium], audience participates [the séance circle], audience believes ["I want to believe"], criticism is forbidden [Mediums halting séances when they detect skepticism], collective creativity [again, the participation of the séance circle]" (Schechner 467). If Goligher was indeed performing

deception – effectively, and with pleasure – it complicates Schechner’s theory of efficacy.

The séance performances certainly had the ability to effect real-world change, but was it tangible? For Goligher, from the vantage of pleasure, perhaps yes. Schechner describes the efficacy/entertainment dyad writing, “every performance – aesthetic or social – is both efficacious and entertaining. That is, each event gets something done and each event gives pleasure to those who participate in it or observe it” (*Performance Studies* 156). If efficacy, for Schechner, equals doing or transforming a state (as in performative acts that do something) this contrasts with performances that are just about mimicry and entertainment. Goligher’s performances collapse the binaries on which Schechner’s braid is implicitly premised: it “gets something done,” giving her (and others) pleasure.

Therefore we can also consider whether there might have been a certain degree of pleasure that Goligher took in performing what she knew to be deception – deception for deception’s sake. It is a delicious inversion of power dynamics for a young blouse cutter from turn-of-the-twentieth-century Belfast to pull one over, so to speak, on these men of science, inhabiting the role of deceiver when women’s bodies are given-to-deceive. In doing so she held the potential to make fools of them. In this sense it can be understood as a *taking* of pleasure – an erotics of trickery, where part of the fun is in knowing that you are the cleverest one in the room. Within the context of her family’s séance circle Kathleen Goligher held the power. The strength of her position is articulated in the force of the external redress – the need for prominent scientists to devote time and space to debunking her and thus reassert intellectual superiority.

Gaps/Holes of Knowledge

Kathleen Goligher's explicit body performances and the confusion they caused can be understood as a metaphor for the fear and confusion at the turn of the twentieth century surrounding female/AFAB sexuality, and in particular, sexual pleasure. After all, the vagina is a black hole of (some) cis-het male knowledge (Fig. 33).¹²⁵ In strategically using the hole between her legs in her séance performances, Goligher invoked a dual gap in understanding: the unknowability of both female/AFAB sexuality and the unknowability and mystery of the afterlife and spirit realm. Where does the ectoplasm come from/how does she cum? Perhaps where the comparison ends is in the amount of time, energy, and resources Crawford and investigators of his ilk devoted to the problem of the afterlife.

There is evidence that the so-called "problem" of women's sexuality has confounded medical (and lay) men since at least the time of Hippocrates. The discontinuities between female and male experiences of sexual pleasure, and the privileging of one over the other leave many women without. In her excellent work on women's sexual satisfaction and the vibrator *The Technology of Orgasm*,¹²⁶ historian of technology Rachel P. Maines writes, "The historically androcentric and pro-natal model of healthy, 'normal' heterosexuality is penetration of the vagina by the penis to male orgasm. It has been clinically noted in many periods that this behavioural framework fails to consistently produce orgasm in more than half of the female population" (3). In other words, sex that favours male pleasure and conception does not acknowledge that penetration alone is rarely enough to get women off. Maines wryly articulates what many women already know (not, as she notes in her book, without considerable pushback along



Fig. 33. Drawing of a physician examining a woman’s abdomen, using “compromise” procedure, in which the physician is kneeling before the woman but cannot see her genitalia, 1822 by Jacques-Pierre Maygrier. from *Nuove dimostrazioni di ostetricia: con incisioni in rame ed un testo ragionato adattato a facilitarne la spiegazione di G.P. Maygrier (atlas)*. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

the way from male scholars, historians, and men-of-science). Her study is a comprehensive look at how science has approached female sexual satisfaction throughout history, including – and of particular relevance to my project – in the nineteenth century. Maines argues that the lack of male knowledge led to the construction of women’s sexuality-as-disease (hysteria), which could be solved through technological development (vibrators).¹²⁷

Freud famously referred to women’s sexuality as a “dark continent” – a phrase with ugly racial and colonial overtones that was meant to telegraph the unknowable (or

heretofore unexplored) nature of it. Formulated this way, the female psyche and sexuality are an obstacle to be surmounted – through subjugation, pathologization, or conquering (*mountain climbing, anyone?*). The most explicit – and to many, elusive – manifestation of women’s sexual pleasure, the orgasm, is of particular mystery and mysticism. In the context of cis-hetero normative sexuality the seemingly straightforward question, “did you come?” is a loaded one from the perspective of masculine patriarchal fear. It invokes the spectre of mimesis and women’s status as dissemblers. Is she “faking it” i.e. performing orgasm? A lack of understanding of the female/AFAB body and sexuality makes it necessary to take a woman’s word for it – a problematic and perhaps terrifying proposition when women are understood to be liars.

The, as Maines describes it, “ordinary and uncomfortably persistent functioning of women’s sexuality outside the dominant sexual paradigm” also creates gaps of knowledge for people *with* vaginas. A hegemonic system that privileges male pleasure is the same one that teaches girls and women to be ashamed and disgusted by, and disconnected from, their own bodies. Wait – *how* many holes do I have down there?¹²⁸ It is a particularly cruel mechanism of control whereby a social system inscribed onto bodies robs women, girls, and people assigned female at birth from the pleasure that their own bodies are capable of – a patriarchal conspiracy if ever there was one. However, try as it might, patriarchal culture cannot prevent women from talking to – and touching – each other. How, then, might this relate to the specific lived and bodily experiences of Kathleen Goligher? What was her relationship with her body? One thing we know is that Goligher was the youngest of four sisters; there was vaginal knowledge in that household. However, one of many problems with the historical account resting on the word of the

men in her orbit (Crawford, but also the investigators/debunkers that were drawn to Goligher because of Crawford's interest in her) is that there is a gap/hole of knowledge around what Goligher herself thought and felt about all of this.

What was going on in and around Goligher's explicit body performances? Were the male séance participants really not aware of where the ectoplasm was coming from? For that matter, what did the female participants think? What did Mrs. Crawford, who helped Kathleen Goligher into her calico knickers, think *was* going on? There is evidence from Crawford's notes that his wife and on a different occasion, a "lady doctor" searched Goligher's body by presumably performing a pelvic exam. In an entry marked 15 June 1920 he writes, "I got a lady doctor to come along. She stripped the medium before the séance and examined her clothing and body. There was nothing concealed" (Crawford as cited in d'Albe 68-69). There is a startling violence to this description that recalls carceral practices. Goligher did not remove her own clothing; she was "stripped" of it in order to be searched. No contraband was ever discovered during similar searches. When the ectoplasm did make an appearance during séances, could those in the circle smell it? There is a humour to the situation, which rests alongside the, by all accounts, earnest belief of the séance circle. Throughout the narrative of his experiments Crawford simultaneously seems to know, or at least guess, and also fundamentally *not get it*. His record of "Experiment 65" reads,

The presence of actual matter below the levitated table... As in previous tests, I felt no sense of pressure whatever, but I did feel a clammy, cold, almost oily sensation—in fact, an indescribable sensation, as though the air there were mixed with particles of dead and disagreeable matter. Perhaps the best word to describe the feeling is 'reptilian.' (Crawford, *Psychic Structures* 145-146)

This begs the questions: what makes an explicit body performance explicit? Does it need to be visual? Is it enough not to see, but to *know*, and in that knowledge have the explicit made evident? If there was true and not feigned ignorance, was it wilful ignorance? If you pretend not to know are you being coy? Protecting someone or something? What is at stake here – propriety? Was Kathleen Goligher pulling something over on Crawford and the other psychical investigators? Was she daring them to call her bluff? Recall also, Schneider’s second use of the term “explicit body” – in which the body is used to explicate. Understood this way, the explicit is also about knowledge, and making the symbolic literal. Goligher’s performances explicate this literality, and make literal the fantasies of gendered scientific knowledge.

Debunking Goligher/Debunking Crawford

Crawford’s investigations with the Goligher circle of course drew the attention of skeptics and debunkers. Charles Marsh Beadnell and E.E. Fournier d’Albe were the two who published debunker accounts, and are the focus of this section. It would be easy to make the reductive argument that these men of science were invested in debunking Goligher’s abilities as a Medium because as a woman (and a performer who used her literal sex) she was inherently distrustful. However, an interesting consequence of Crawford being the one who both told and vouched for her story is that the debunkers were in effect debunking *him* rather than *her*. In the previous chapter I asked: who participates in debunker performances/conversations, and for whom are they intended? Thinking about social capital amongst scientists themselves is helpful when trying to understand the motivations of scientist-on-scientist debunkings. Not all scientists are

created equally, held in the same esteem, or possess the same social capital. William J. Crawford, the Belfast college lecturer, was no giant of science like John Tyndall. One of the ways in which scientific authority is performed and delineated between scientists themselves is through the act of the debunker defending his social capital (and the respectability of his field) and performing distancing measures through the act of debunking. As historian of science Rhys Iwan Morus, writing about scientific performance notes, “Putting on a show in instances like these is a matter of self-fashioning. It is all about playing to one’s peers, demonstrating that one knows the rules of the game – and making sure that those who can’t or won’t act accordingly are marginalized or excluded” (777). It makes sense then that Crawford, rather than Goligher, was the primary subject of the debunker attacks. Performances and the regulation of masculinity are generally formed in relation to, and for the benefit of other men.

The German physician, psychiatrist and psychological researcher Albert von Schrenck-Notzing outlined what was at stake amongst the men of science participating in debunker discourse. He wrote of the potential damage to the investigator, saying,

Not only are his powers of observation, his critical judgment and his credibility brought into question, not only is he exposed to ridicule by the reproach of charlatanism—as, for example, was the famous criminal anthropologist, Lombroso—but he even incurs the danger of being regarded as mentally deficient, or even as insane, as was the case with the astronomer, Zollner, and the English chemist, Crookes. The open or secret opponents of scientific men thus discredited are in the habit of deriving some advantage from the destruction of their scientific authority. (von Schrenck-Notzing v)

The awareness of this risk to a man’s reputation and authority is written all over the accounts of psychological researchers in the form of a defensive rhetorical position. It speaks to the often-polemical nature of debunker accounts. In fact, debunking – or at the very

least discrediting the ideas of each other – is a fairly standard element of scientific, and for that matter, any scholarly performance. The act of building upon or verifying research sometimes looks like the less-than-gentle tearing apart of the work of another researcher.

In reading Crawford, one can sense that he was anticipating an attempted debunking and wanted to protect his “most perfect work” against accusations of fraud. He clearly also wanted to protect Kathleen Goligher. In *Reality of Psychic Phenomena* Crawford writes,

To Miss Kathleen Goligher, one of the greatest and best of physical mediums, I feel that it is necessary publicly to apologise for having, in her case, even to mention the fraud hypothesis. She knows, however, that I must do so. The truth, of course, is that nobody who has not visited the circle can have even the faintest idea of the magnitude of the forces involved, and the extraordinary variety and intensity of the phenomena produced. To all visitors the phenomena are so manifestly and palpably genuine that they are never troubled again with doubts as to whether there is such a thing as psychic force. (20)

Crawford practically trips over himself as he apologises for even breathing life into the notion that Goligher’s abilities might not be genuine. He thus positions himself as white knight, defender of Goligher (“the greatest and best”!), himself (possessor of “the truth”!), and their work together. To the potential haters he says: anyone who dares claim otherwise simply is not in possession of all the facts (“read my book(s)”!) and has not seen the feats for themselves. This was true for one of Goligher’s debunkers – Beadnell’s critique is solely based on his interpretation of Crawford’s texts – but unfortunately for Crawford, Fournier d’Albe, who would go on to provide the “definitive” debunking, did attend the séances himself.

While both debunkings of Goligher/Crawford arrive at the same conclusion – not an authentic Medium – they do it in drastically different styles. The first, a 1920 pamphlet published by Charles Marsh Beadnell lays it all out in the title: “The Reality or

Unreality of Spiritualistic Phenomena Being a Criticism of Dr. W.J. Crawford's Investigations Into Levitations and Raps." Beadnell (Fig. 34) was born in a military camp in Rawalpindi, Pakistan in 1872 (making him eight years Crawford's senior). The eldest son of a Major in the Royal Artillery, Beadnell followed in his father's military footsteps and was educated at Cheltenham College (motto: *Labor omnia vincit* – "Work conquers all") before receiving his medical training at Guy's Hospital in London, England.¹²⁹ He went on to join the Royal Navy, and at the time of his pamphlet's publication was a Surgeon-Captain as well as a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, and a Fellow of the Chemical Society (Obituary, 591).¹³⁰ Beadnell's skepticism, or debunker



Fig. 34. Admiral Charles M. Beadnell, circa approx. 1905, photograph by Harris & Ewing. Fair use, via Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.

proclivities, were apparently an essential enough part of his identity to warrant mention in his obituary, which states, “His special interest in evolution made him a rationalist early in life; indeed, before he left Guy’s Hospital he confessed that he was ‘a devout agnostic.’ His views, of course, were not universally acceptable, but his sincerity and tolerance often disarmed criticism” (Obituary, 592). Presumably, Beadnell extended more sincerity and tolerance to his colleagues at the *British Medical Journal* than he did to Crawford.

Though the pamphlet does not contain a publication date beyond the year 1920, it is mentioned critically in the June 12, 1920 issue of *Light*. This means Crawford almost certainly would have read the attack on him and his work before taking his own life a little less than two months later. Though it would be overly presumptuous to assume that Beadnell’s debunking was *the* precipitating factor for Crawford’s breakdown, it certainly could have added to his stress at the time. According to his friends at *Light* this included “having just completed a new book, and...preparing for a lecturing tour in America. He was no doubt feeling the strain of these tasks” and “His wife stated that he has been suffering from sleeplessness for some weeks” (“Death of Dr. W. J. Crawford” iii). At the very least, the timing of Beadnell’s attempt to debunk Crawford’s work with the Goligher circle adds additional context to Crawford’s final letter to his friend David Gow, and his assertion that it was “the most perfect work I have done in my life. Everything connected with it is absolutely correct, and will bear every scrutiny” (v).

The pamphlet is essentially a close reading of sections of Crawford’s *Reality of Psychic Phenomena*, in which Beadnell concludes that Crawford is being deceived. He quotes directly from Crawford at length, allowing his own work to stand against him. In

the relatively short pamphlet Beadnell manages to knock off a number of debunker discourse's greatest hits. He performs his own intellectual authority throughout by regularly peppering his prose with Latin phrases. For example, he appears to be showing off his educational pedigree when he writes, "Dr. Crawford and his followers are still convinced it is the spooks who raise the table! *Populus vult decipi, decipiatur*"¹³¹ (Beadnell 19). While not altogether uncommon for the day, the use of Latin still had the function of telegraphing a certain degree of education and can be read as a distancing tactic and performative virtue signalling. Crawford's allies at *Light* (themselves not beyond performing their own credentials) answered this in their review of Beadnell's pamphlet with the decidedly snarky, "*Aquila non capit muscas*" – translation: an eagle does not catch flies, meaning the Spiritualists were too important (literally above them, as is an eagle) to deal with such trivial criticisms.

In his pamphlet Beadnell also aligns himself with the giant of Scientific Naturalism Huxley when he writes, "The intellectually honest decline to enter such a fools' paradise. 'Not what is 'satisfying,' but what is true,' is their demand, for they recognize with Huxley 'that there is no alleviation to the sufferings of mankind except veracity of thought and action and the resolute facing of the world as it is'" (Beadnell 22). Beadnell also constantly insults the intelligence of his opponent, referring to Crawford's, "extreme credulity, self-deception, and fallacious reasoning" (10) and stating that, "His so-called explanations of 'psychic phenomena' disclose an atavistic cerebration worthy of the savage who puts a spirit behind the thunder-clap and the earthquake. He strains at gnats and swallows camels, missing the obvious and natural causes of the most commonplace events" (20-21). Beadnell similarly questions Crawford's expertise

writing, “I do not know of what particular branch of science Dr. Crawford is an ornament, but I do know that if a schoolboy offered as evidence in a class of elementary physics that which is offered as such in this book he would be sent to the bottom of the class” (21). It is clear in all of his flowery and mocking language that Beadnell is relishing his snarky takedown of Crawford. However, he also performs the standard rhetorical debunker trick of moving the goalposts away from his own ego towards a larger concern for the downfall of humanity that a belief in Spiritualism apparently signals. Towards the end of the pamphlet, Beadnell’s lays out his motivations,

As a medical man, I feel bound to state as my firm belief that a careful, dispassionate examination of the whole question of Spiritualism from a point of view commanding the broadest outlook in time and space will reveal an ever-accumulating evidence to show that the sum-total of human happiness, far from being increased, is being decreased by this creed and its practices, and *the clock of civilization is being set back.*” (22, emphasis mine)

As mentioned, Beadnell’s pamphlet was not particularly well received by Spiritualists. In the June 12, 1920 issue of the periodical *Light* the publishers stuck up for their friend Crawford writing of the pamphlet, “It is a solemn trifle, solemnly concerned with trifles – quibbling and pettifogging” (7).

The man of science who performed what would come to be known as the definitive debunking of Goligher’s abilities as a Medium was Edmund Edward Fournier d’Albe (1868-1933) (Fig. 35). Born in London, England to an English mother and German father (who later added “d’Albe” to the family surname – perhaps an attempt to erase certain familial histories or align with others), Fournier d’Albe was a physicist, inventor, Celtic-enthusiast, and populariser of science. Educated in Germany, Fournier d’Albe obtained a B.Sc. in inorganic chemistry and physics from The Royal College of Science, London in 1891 and a doctorate in physics from the University of Birmingham



Fig. 35. Edmund Edward Fournier d’Albe, by Lafayette, half-plate nitrate negative, 14 April 1932. © National Portrait Gallery, London. Reproduced with permission.

in 1913. He occupied various intersecting spheres of cultural and intellectual life – establishing and working towards the cause of a Pan-Celticism,¹³² authoring popular science books, holding the position of Assistant Lecturer in physics at the University of Birmingham, and building on his doctoral research on Selenium to invent the “optophone,” an early iteration of a device which used optical character recognition to convert text to musical notes, allowing Blind people to read (Lunney, “Fournier d’Albe, Edmund Edward”).¹³³

Like many scientific men of his day Fournier d’Albe developed an interest in Spiritualism and authored books on the subject including *Two New Worlds* (1907), *New Light on Immortality* (1908), and an English translation of famed German psychical researcher Albert von Schrenck-Notzing’s book *Phenomena of materialization; a*

contribution to the investigation of mediumistic teleplastics (1920). At the time of his involvement with the Goligher circle Fournier d'Albe was a believer in Spiritualism who had previously endorsed the explicit body performances of the famous French Medium who was known as 'Eva C.' In early 1921 – following Crawford's suicide – his literary executor retained Fournier d'Albe to, in his words, “undertake a further series of researches with the same medium and circle, in order, if possible, to obtain an independent confirmation of his results and theories and to collect further data concerning the nature of these marvellous manifestations” (6).

In contrast to Beadnell's armchair criticism, Fournier d'Albe conducted extensive research with the Goligher circle, setting out to see if he could replicate the results of Crawford's experiments. The conclusions he drew from twenty séance sittings were published in his 1922 book *The Goligher Circle, May-August 1921: Experiences of E. E. Fournier d'Albe: with an appendix containing extracts from the correspondence of the late W.J. Crawford, and others*. Fournier d'Albe apparently approached the research with a combination of earnest belief and scientific rigour. He wrote, “I gladly took up this work in the hope of establishing a link between the phenomena presented by the French medium and those described so exhaustively by Dr. Crawford” (Fournier d'Albe 6).

It was during Fournier d'Albe's thirteenth sitting with the Goligher circle on July 22, 1921 that he reported first witnessing deception. He began to harbour suspicions, noting, “a tendency among several members of the circle to find an excuse for bringing the sittings to an end. On the hypothesis of trickery this would very naturally be attributed to an increasing nervousness regarding the possibility of detection” (Fournier d'Albe 34). By his nineteenth sitting with the circle on August 23, 1921 the relationship began to

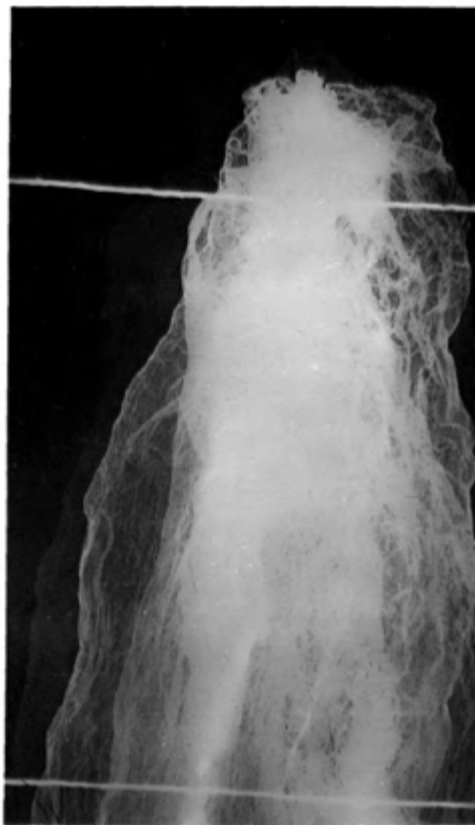
break down, with Fournier d'Albe reportedly offering, "a discussion on the evidence so far obtained. I said it was very disappointing, as none of it was capable of withstanding a searching criticism" (42). For their part (at least according to Fournier d'Albe) it appears that the Goligher's pushed back, "K said, 'You have got nothing yet.' M said: 'You wouldn't get as far as the street with it.' G said, 'Dr. Crawford was four years working before he was satisfied. You will get what you want if you go on for some time'" (42).

After this Fournier d'Albe wrote to Kathleen Goligher directly, letting her know that since the sittings had "not furnished any definite evidence in favour of the psychic origin of the numerous phenomena witnessed by me" he would not be attending any more. In contrast to the public, mocking debunker performance of Beadnell, Fournier d'Albe maintained a gentlemanly tone and kept the door open, so to speak, offering, "If you have any ideas or proposals for restoring the opinion held of your phenomena in Dr. Crawford's time, I shall be glad to consider them. Meanwhile, I enclose cheque in final payment for the series" (43). After sending this letter Fournier d'Albe did in fact attend one final test séance with the Goligher circle in which no further phenomena were reproduced. In his own published work on the investigations Fournier d'Albe reproduced excerpts of Crawford's notebooks, including sections where Crawford discussed his theory that the ectoplasm was coming from Goligher's vagina. Fournier d'Albe offered no comment on that. He did, however, identify the ectoplasm (Fig. 36) as "an object resembling a piece of white muslin or chiffon about the size of a man's handkerchief, caught between KG's feet" (Fournier d'Albe 37). In his final ruling on the matter, he proclaimed, "After a careful study of the late Dr. Crawford's books and the lengthy investigation on the spot which has been described in the preceding pages, I am satisfied

that all the phenomena I witnessed myself were produced by normal physical means.”

Ever the balanced, objective scientist, he continued,

I do not propose to deal on this occasion with the larger question as to whether any of the results obtained by Dr. Crawford were supernormal. I have no reason to doubt his integrity and conscientiousness in observing or recording the phenomena. But he failed, in my opinion, to make sufficient allowance for the possibilities of co-operation and practice on the part of the medium and the circle, especially the latter, should such have existed, and where miraculous claims are made even unconscious fraud must be allowed for. (Fournier d’Albe 56)



Shadowgraph of Ectoplasm by
Dr. Fournier d’Albe. Medium: K.G. (Belfast).
June 13 1921. Left side.
— No. 1 —

Fig. 36. A shadowgraph of ectoplasm (which would have been produced by placing the ectoplasm directly on a sheet of photosensitive paper under a sheet of glass and exposing it to light) included as evidence in Fournier d’Albe’s *Goligher Circle* (1922). Public domain, via The Internet Archive.

It appears, then, that it is in fact possible to investigate and debunk an assertion without participating in the self-righteousness of debunker discourse.

Perhaps the biggest blow to Crawford and Goligher's work together that would forever associate them with accusations of fraud was a mention in one of the most famous debunker texts of the time, *A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924) by Harry Houdini. The world famous magician in essence amplified the debunking accounts of Fournier d'Albe and Beadnell by including them in his book. Houdini wrote of Crawford that, "his credulity seemed limitless" and "he seems mad to me" (174). He also reprinted the summary of Fournier d'Albe's conclusion of fraud in full, followed by the mocking, "Poor Dr. Crawford!" (175).

Conclusion

Kathleen Goligher was not the only savvy Medium to use her vagina as "off-stage" space in her performances. Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, author of *Materialisation Phenomena* (1920), found similarities between Goligher's explicit body performances and those of famous physical Mediums Eva C. and Eusapia Paladino (Fournier d'Albe 81). Similarly, the American Medium Mina "Margery" Crandon produced materializations from her vagina, as detailed in David Jaher's *The Witch of Lime Street* (2015). In pulling back their curtains on the vaginal "tah-dah!" they provided a counterpoint to the "aha!" of the debunker, and invoked the magic that female/AFAB bodies are capable of. We can thus reframe explicit ectoplasmic performance from hiding space/locus of deceit to consider how the incorporation of her vaginal space enhanced a Medium's performance. In the use of such a loaded site on the body Mediums like

Kathleen Goligher were in effect speaking back to the cis-hetero patriarchy that casts women as liars and ignores their sexual pleasure.

The greatest gap/hole in all of this knowledge is how Kathleen Goligher herself felt about her performances, her time with Crawford, and her eventual debunking. She would no doubt find it a peculiarity to be included in a dissertation more than one hundred years after her famous séances.¹³⁴ Knowing little about the woman herself (beyond the decades of feminist thought she never lived to see) I am fairly confident that she would not agree or identify with my analysis here. With her death, Kathleen's thoughts and feelings about this time in her life were lost, but perhaps we can find agency in the fact that after her early brush with fame she, for the most part, returned to a private life. It is questionable whether this was an assertion of her privacy, or more a function of a woman who, like so many others, lost much of her time to motherhood. In 1925 Goligher married S.G. Donaldson, a psychical researcher and "pioneer of infra-red photography in the séance room" (Gaunt 164). Donaldson himself implies that the demands of heteropatriarchal mothering are what kept Goligher away from her work as a Medium. In a 1933 publication "Five Experiments with Miss Kate Goligher" he writes of his wife, "Since her marriage to the writer eight years ago, Miss Goligher has sat [for séances] intermittently owing to her time being occupied with the nursing and care of two daughters" (Donaldson 89).

It does appear that Kathleen Goligher found a new male to champion her Mediumistic abilities in her husband. There is evidence of them beginning to hold test séances again in the 1930s – though nothing that would be as publicised as her work with Crawford had been. In 1936 John B. McIndoe published the piece "Ectoplasm

Photographed: A Recent Sitting with Kathleen Goligher,” in the weekly Spiritualist journal “The Two Worlds.” In it he writes,

MRS. DONALDSON (Kathleen Goligher), whose phenomena were the subject of prolonged and thorough investigation some twenty years ago by the late Dr. W. Crawford, of Belfast, has not sat regularly for a number of years; but she has not lost her powers, and there can be little doubt that with regular sitting the phenomena witnessed by Crawford would be repeated, and perhaps amplified. The adoption of recent scientific discoveries to Psychic Research make possible investigation on lines not open to Crawford, and would certainly confirm his conclusions as to the reality of the phenomena, and probably throw a flood of light on the nature of ectoplasm and psychic structures. In recent years I have sat twice with Mrs. Donaldson, and the main phases of the phenomena recurred. The last occasion was on April 10th, 1936. The sitting was at Mr. and Mrs. Donaldson’s house, near Belfast, where I was a guest, and was a more or less impromptu affair, arising out of a conversation on infra-red photography at the dinner-table.” (McIndoe 370)

Donaldson’s work with photography is significant as yet another connection between photography, performance, and scientific discovery – all bound up in the woman’s body as vanishing point, and that which the camera can/cannot see. There is no recorded evidence of Goligher producing ectoplasm from her vagina at this time, but the séances took place in a space that would have no less conjured the metaphors of birth and creation that I have teased out of her earlier performances. As her husband wrote, “All the sittings took place in a top room of my house, used as a day nursery” (Donaldson 90).

Embodied Borderlands

Kathleen Goligher existed across multiple Borderlands. She spent her life in Belfast, Northern Ireland, a contested territory claimed by both Ireland and England. Though we do not hear reference to this in Crawford's narratives, the violence and instability of this would have certainly had a significant impact on her life. Similarly, she lived through multiple wars, notably "The Great War," and the Irish War of Independence, which together spanned the entire period during which she performed the majority of her séances. War is undoubtedly a Borderland space: one of uncertainty and volatility that is often fought over the contestation of physical borders themselves. In wartime Borderlands, the living and the dead come into close contact with each other. Goligher also existed in another, embodied, Borderland state during this period – adolescence. This charged and potentially fraught temporal/bodily space in which one exists between child and adulthood, holds slippages both ways. It is also, significantly, a Borderland of sexuality: burgeoning and new, excited and inexperienced, precocious and naïve.

*In her performances Goligher made use of her vagina, one of the most charged and contested bodily Borderlands spaces. Through the vaginal Borderlands spirits are birthed; it is the corporeal threshold through which both the ante-life and afterlife pass, the long dead and the not yet fully alive. Maternity, and particularly pregnancy, is a Borderland state, where two bodies exist in one, and one exists between the two identities of mother/not. In *The Argonauts* Maggie Nelson asks, "Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's 'normal' state, and occasions a radical intimacy with – and radical alienation from – one's body?" (13). To give birth is an act of traversing the Borderlands: touching life, touching death, linking matrilineal histories. It seems significant then that both birther/birthed forget the feeling of what it was to be in these Borderlands – they exist somewhere in our subconscious like a dream (or nightmare). The Borderlands of pregnancy and birth shift and extend to motherhood, whereby one's body continues to be both theirs and not: a new split reality in which self and other are so dependent and forever intertwined.*

These literal and metaphorical Borderlands of creation extend to artistic production. There is great artistic potential to be found in the Borderlands. This concept is particularly emphasized and finds place in body art, where the artist's body exists in the Borderlands of subject/object/artistic medium. The artist is both medium, and Medium, using their body as a conduit to channel their ideas and give them life. Performance art, which exists in the Borderlands of life/theatre, is a particularly rich site for such creation.

Chapter 4

Doing Magic: Performing Art, Filling Holes

Introduction

In this chapter I shift from a focus on turn of the century Spiritualism and science in Belfast to North American performance art from the late twentieth century. I do not, however, leave Kathleen Goligher behind. Rather, I bring her along with me on a trans-temporal, trans-Atlantic exploration of the intersections between her performances and those of two women performance artists who would come after her.

The objectives of this chapter are threefold. First, I connect the vaginal ectoplasmic performances of Kathleen Goligher to performance art and suggest there is value in considering them in relation to one another. I do this by charting the connections between Goligher's séance performances and performance art aesthetics. I then further this analysis by placing her performances into a lineage of feminist performance artists whose use of vaginal space in their performances echoes Goligher's – albeit with deliberate postmodern, political precision. The second goal of this chapter is to look at Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* (1975), and Annie Sprinkle's *Post-Porn Modernist* (1989-1996) through a lens borrowed from and influenced by my analysis of Kathleen Goligher, that of spirituality and magic. I find examples of spirituality in both performances, and extend my analysis to look at the various ways that magic in performance is linked to female sexuality. I also consider the importance of magic and magicians to the history of Spiritualism, in particular their roles as debunkers. I extend my work on defining and describing debunker discourse by comparing it to the role of the

critic, and exploring how Schneemann's and Sprinkle's performances both elicit debunker discourse and speak back to it. In doing so I suggest that the performance artists I consider contend with similar challenges as Spiritualists like Goligher did – namely a desire on the part of debunker-critics to delegitimize and ultimately stop their performances. The value of this transhistorical method, which I expand upon in the following section, is that it allows me to complicate existing histories of late nineteenth/early twentieth century Spiritualism and twentieth century performance art.

The performances that I closely analyze in this chapter are both landmark examples of feminist explicit body performance art in which vaginal performance is an integral part. In *Interior Scroll* (1975/79), Carolee Schneemann conjured pre-patriarchal goddess imagery while pulling a paper scroll from her vagina on which she had written a feminist rebuke to masculinist modern art critics, and the limited opportunities for women within the art world at the time. Schneemann stood in front of an audience and read from the scroll as she unfurled it from her body, offering a powerful example of the female nude body – long a preoccupation within art history – speaking back, and for itself using an ancient technology (i.e. writing on scrolls). Sprinkle's *Post-Porn Modernist* (1989-1996) on the other hand was a genre-defying one woman show/performance art spectacular that blended a lecture-format in which she used autobiographical narrative to deconstruct issues such as persona, the performance of identity, pleasure, sex work, AIDS, and spirituality. In a section of the show that is particularly relevant to my study, Sprinkle invoked the “ancient sacred prostitute” and performed a masturbation ritual as her persona Anya. Because the two performances predate my birth (Schneemann), and my theatre going (Sprinkle), I work from the performance documentation and ephemera

that exists now as a part of the archive. Where possible, like with Sprinkle's *Post-Porn Modernist*, I also worked from the script and video documentation.

By thinking about Kathleen Goligher's ectoplasmic séance performances as performance art and finding connections between them and the work of Schneemann and Sprinkle, I bring together ideas that I have built upon in the preceding chapters of this dissertation. Anti-theatrical and anti-performance art sentiment, the patriarchal distrust and notion of women as dissemblers that is rooted in female/AFAB anatomy, the construction and enforcement of masculine authority, patriarchal fear and confusion of the female body (in particular female sexuality and pleasure), and the magic of female sexuality all come to a head here. Throughout this dissertation I have been careful not to collapse "female" into "woman" in order to account for trans bodies. However, because of the essentialist nature of the works I discuss in this chapter (which were made at very different points in history from now) I intentionally speak about female bodies, while raising the issues inherent in doing so. For example, the goddess symbolism and feminist spirituality I discuss is very much about the conflation of the category of "woman" and female anatomy, so an inclusion of AFAB corporeality is simultaneously an anachronism and not what Schneemann and Sprinkle's work is actually about.

I begin this chapter by interrogating the differences between Goligher, Schneemann, and Sprinkle's performances, while at the same time presenting a case for why they should be considered alongside one another. This includes an argument for why Goligher's Spiritualist performances should be considered performance art. I then define my historical methodology, which I term (va)genealogy. I use this to situate Goligher, Schneemann, and Sprinkle in a landscape of other performance artists who have used

vaginal performance as a device in their work, and to briefly discuss existing Performance Studies scholarship about vaginal performances. From there I perform what I am calling a (C)lit review, a section in which I massage some of the existing scholarly work on Schneemann and Sprinkle's performances into meaningful connection with my own. The following three sections of the chapter offer introductions and overviews of the three primary angles of my analysis: feminist spirituality in performance, magic, and the debunker-as-critic. The remaining half of the chapter is dedicated to close readings of *Interior Scroll* and *Post-Porn Modernist* using the above framework. In doing so, I tackle the following questions: are these artists also somehow magicians? How do they engage with notions of feminist spirituality and magic in their performances? Is there something in the act of artistic creation – imbued with intuition as it is – that grants artists access to a specialized realm? How does magic both originate from the body, and have the ability to transcend corporeality? Why might those on the margins be drawn to magic, and how does this combine with a feminist spirituality to become a distinctly queer aesthetic with the potential to imagine alternatives to hegemonic norms and recoup agency? And how might the assertion of that agency via performance be received by certain actors as a threat to the patriarchal order, necessitating not only criticism but an attempt to discredit and stop it?

Same, but very different

I continue this dissertation's approach to cross-temporal analysis by placing the explicit body performances of Kathleen Goligher into conversation with works by feminist performance artists who came after her. Though there are certainly major

differences between the lives, performances, and contexts of Goligher, Schneemann, and Sprinkle, I find value in thinking about their interconnectedness. In the previous chapter I provided a twenty-first century feminist analysis for reading Goligher's performances. I extend that analysis here by thinking through Goligher's Mediumistic performances in the context of performance art in order to find the connections, linkages, overlap, and indeed disjunction with the artists who would come after her. In doing so I chart how the representation and reception of women's explicit body performances both have and have not changed over the approximately one hundred-year time frame. I also provide a different historical precedent for body art that is often overlooked when people such as RoseLee Goldberg (in *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, first published in 1979) try to trace performance art to the modernists of the twentieth century.

Why think about Kathleen Goligher's séance performances as explicit body performance art? As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, there is an inherent theatricality to séance performances (and the scientist and debunker performances that existed to both bolster and debunk them). Like performance art, séances generally took place off-stage and in spaces, like the home, which were not coded as innately theatrical.¹³⁵ There is also a clear relationship between Kathleen Goligher's vaginal performances where she summoned spirits and those of performance artists that came after her, as well as a connection to be made between particular masculine critical responses to the work. Although, as discussed in the previous chapter, existing accounts of Goligher's séances raise many stage management questions, for the purpose of this chapter I write about Goligher's performances as intentional acts on her part. In other words, I assume that it *was* Goligher who placed the ectoplasm/muslin in her vagina and

produced it during séances. I do not intend this to be read as my taking a particular side or asserting a skeptical position in alignment with debunkers. Rather, in order to think about Goligher as an artist, I find it essential to think of her not as a passive vessel or conduit, as Crawford understood her, but as an active and skilled performer who made dramaturgical choices. I contend that this is not mutually exclusive with maintaining a belief in the veracity of Goligher's Spiritualist performances. In considering Goligher an artist, the operators/spirits can be thought of as artistic inspiration and guides, or related to an extra-sensory intuition she tapped into.¹³⁶ In doing so I build on the work of art historian Jennifer Fisher, who in her anthology *Technologies of Intuition* (2006) theorized intuition as it relates to artistic creation, thereby centring a practice that resonates with many artists despite its previous exclusion from art theory and criticism. In her Introduction to *Technologies* Fisher links both Spiritualism and artist-performers, noting that, "The Spiritualist practice of channelling discarnate spirits was considered a highly creative state eagerly sought after by many fin-de-siècle artists, and perhaps best exemplified by Loïe Fuller, who was assumed at the time to have mediumistic abilities" (22). Reading Kathleen Goligher's performances through the lens of art provides a language for what she was doing beyond fakery, and an engagement with her actions that allows us to find other forms of agency in them.

Goligher's performances share many of the themes and aesthetics that are explored in Schneemann and Sprinkle's pieces. Ritual, magic, spirituality, and sexuality are all invoked in their works. The centring of the vagina and use of vaginal space in a performance context also points to the ingenuity and playfulness of women performers who use their bodies as a site of concealment (and an opportunity to reveal). This

simultaneously adds to the spectacle and compelling nature of the performances and in doing so engages with and reconfigures patriarchal fantasies of women defined by their “lack.” In response to patriarchal cultural contexts in which women are defined and reduced to their hole – surveilled, legislated, and subjected to baseless sexist theories (e.g. the psychoanalytic framing of women as “lacking”) – artists who centre the hole, or deploy its use strategically, embrace its potent symbolism for themselves.

A significant difference between Kathleen Goligher and the artists discussed in this chapter is that she did not have the opportunity to “speak back” to her detractors – through her performances or directly.¹³⁷ As I discussed at length in the previous chapter, it was Crawford who did the speaking for Goligher, essentially mediating between her performances and the public through his books and articles (the Medium’s medium?). We do not have information about Goligher’s level of literacy, but as she was a working class girl whose schooling ended before she entered her teens we can assume it was lower than Crawford, who held a doctorate. Regardless, because of her class, sex, and ethnicity she did not have the authority to command a wide audience in the same way Crawford did. At first glance her performances did not have any overt cultural critiques or politicized content (though by partnering with Crawford to provide evidence for the veracity of Spiritualism she was, in fact, wading into a highly politicized and ongoing debate between science and the supernatural).

By contrast, the performance artists I discuss in this chapter appeared in very different contexts, in the sense of time, space, and role. Time is a particularly important difference. The performances of Schneemann (mid-seventies), and Sprinkle (late-eighties to mid-nineties) all crucially happened after major developments in feminism (namely the

second wave) and art (namely post-modernism and the emergence of performance art as a recognized form).¹³⁸ There is no historical record indicating an interest in or engagement with contemporary feminist movements on the part of Kathleen Goligher. Even if she did identify with, or hold feminist political ideas, the conversations and concerns of first wave feminism were very different than those taken up in the latter half of the twentieth century post second-wave.¹³⁹ Goligher's performances all took place within the dedicated performance spaces of the séance room(s), and likewise the performances of Schneemann and Sprinkle were staged in spaces delineated for performance (a lecture hall and theatres, respectively). But crucially, whereas Goligher's séances were understood as spiritual practice, Schneemann and Sprinkle's performances were framed *as art*. This is a particularly important distinction because it buttresses the deliberate critique(s) and messaging in each of the works and, as I will expand upon later in the chapter, is relevant to "debunker" style attacks relevant to censorship, funding, and artistic lineage. Unlike Goligher, who had a masculine mouthpiece (Crawford) separating her from a wider audience, Schneemann and Sprinkle represented and mythologized themselves. Also unlike Goligher, the vaginal elements of their performances were explicit (in all senses of the word). There was no experimentation necessary to ascertain what was happening. Rather, these artists used their bodies in their work to centre their subjectivity and provide commentary/provoke discussion surrounding perspective and the gaze. Their performances were interjections into the long history of art in which male artists represented women (and in particular the female nude) as passive sexualized objects, versus active sexual subjects, and artists of merit, themselves.

In framing Kathleen Goligher's séance performances as explicit body performance art, I ask: what are the implications of calling – or thinking about something as – performance art when it wasn't intended as such? One way to approach this question is by thinking about the intention behind the label. For example, is it being wielded as pejorative, intended to ridicule? In this context labelling something performance art that was clearly not intended as such is a tactic for calling something frivolous or silly, while drawing upon the historical weight of antitheatricality. It can be a useful shorthand for something people do not understand, or perhaps consider elitist. Similar questions are broached by Laura Levin in her chapter on disgraced former (now deceased) Toronto mayor Rob Ford, where she asks, "what it might mean to read politicians not simply as performers, but also, and more specifically, as 'performance artists'?" (239). Levin makes a compelling argument for taking Ford seriously as a performance artist, an act which has the ability to reframe conversations about politics and political performance. She writes,

The label *performance art*, to begin with, often allows the press to transport Ford to the *margins*, to present him as an irrational presence in an otherwise rational political arena. Taking seriously Ford as a performance artist would reverse this gaze and turn it back on the sphere of politics itself. The performance artist could then be viewed as an insider, as someone who fully embodies the norms of a given system – pushing them to their extremes to reveal something about that system's logic and form. (Levin 244)

Taken this way, reading Goligher's work as a Medium as instances of feminist explicit body performance art, allows us to reveal the various dynamics at work in the system of Spiritualist/debunker performances.

My use of the term also allows me to link Goligher's performances to performance art examples that followed and to extend genealogies of explicit body

performance, which tend to prioritize work from the 1960s onwards. While labels can be limiting, there is nonetheless power in naming something. To name something is to capture what is wide, expansive, and changing, and to place precise meaning on it. This allows us to not only draw connections, but to place it within a specific cultural and political context. To my mind there is a connection between the vaginal performances of the artists discussed in this chapter – a category I expand to include Goligher.

Constellations/Matrices

By reading Goligher alongside Sprinkle and Schneemann my goal is to not only challenge traditional interpretations of Spiritualist performance, but also to complicate existing histories of performance art. In order to do so, I draw from Foucault’s practice of genealogy (albeit with my own feminist intervention). Foucault, following Nietzsche, famously used genealogy as a historical method to trouble commonly agreed-upon origins of ideas, practices and structures. As a method of critique genealogy complicates linear historical narratives. Instead, it allows historians to construct counter-histories by looking to the historical conditions, conflicts, and underlying power dynamics that have shaped our present understanding of concepts such as “power” or “sexuality.” My methodology is similar to the work of other performance art genealogies, in particular Performance Studies scholar Uri McMillan’s *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (2015). In his “multicentury and multigenerational” work McMillan “expand[s] the scope of materials counted under the aegis of ‘performance art’” (3). Similarly, my project follows a logic of expansion of what is considered

performance art (i.e. the inclusion of Kathleen Goligher), rather than attempting to redefine its origins.

I am drawn to the freedom, and play, of mapping a landscape; tracing not a straight line, but expanding something from the inside out: a (va)genealogy. As a method for analyzing historical vaginal performances, a (va)genealogy is attuned to pleasure, slipperiness, and that which may be concealed. McMillan writes about “construct[ing] a dynamic matrix of black performance art that begins prior to the mythic origins of performance art and expands its environs” (4). The use of the term “matrix” (the root of which is the Latin “mater,” or “mother,” and which came to specifically mean “womb”) is relevant here also. (Va)genealogies can be used to unite a matrix of performers that do not necessarily connect to each other chronologically or exist on a continuum that would suggest an evolution.¹⁴⁰ Instead, they connect performances that are related by recurrences in performance gesture and strategy. The performances in this matrix all also fundamentally take on the psychoanalytic configuration of women-as-*lacking*, and in doing so are made vulnerable to unwelcome patriarchal insertions/attempts to regulate.

This landscape of feminist vaginal performance art includes many pieces that for reasons of scope I cannot incorporate in this chapter. Some of these include, Shigeko Kubota’s *Vagina Painting* (1965), VALIE EXPORT’s *Genital Panic* (1968) and *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), Casey Jenkins’ *Casting Off My Womb* (2013), Lena Marquise’s *Body as Commodity* (2014), Dayna MacLeod’s *Uterine Concert Hall* (2016), and Narcissister’s *Marilyn* (2016) and vaginal-performance artist par excellence Jess Dobkin’s *Fee for Service* (2006), *Clown Car* (2008), and *Being Green* (2009).¹⁴¹ This is

to say nothing of the countless pieces of vaginal art undertaken by art students around the world.¹⁴²

While work about vaginal imagery in art is well represented,¹⁴³ there are surprisingly few scholars who have engaged in theory and analysis of vaginal performance through the lens of Performance Studies. In “Stand-up comedy and the legacy of the mature vagina” (2012) performance scholar Roberta Mock reads the work of older female comedians (including Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, and Roseanne Barr) whose explicit references to their vaginas in their comedy acts as, “a playfully political discursive strategy” (9). Tiffany E. Barber briefly discusses the vaginal elements of some of performance artist Narcissister’s transgressive works, detailing how the artist inserts and pulls things out of her vagina in pieces like *Every Woman* (2008/9). However Barber stops short of analyzing these dramaturgical acts. Situated slightly outside (pun intended) of this work is Alex Lyons’ 2024 doctoral thesis, *Vulvaplicity: vulvas and identities in contemporary performance*, in which she centres the vulva as a site of analysis, and writes about performers who, “intentionally frame their vulvas in order to resignify the social, political and cultural meanings of their bodies in contemporary performance” (26). Most relevant to this dissertation is *Public Privates: performing gynecology from both ends of the speculum* (1997) by Terri Kapsalis. In her chapter “Retooling the Speculum: Annie Sprinkle’s ‘Public Cervix Announcement’” Kapsalis analyzes the Public Cervix Announcement portion of Sprinkle’s *Post-Porn Modernist* show and demonstrates how, “codes of medicine, art, and pornography function within the PCA...the aspect of actual gynaecological practice [that] PCA highlight[s], critique[s], [and] reinscribe[s]...[and how] a theatrical mode of representation alter[s] cervical display, and vice versa” (116).

For the purposes of this chapter, I chose to focus on two performances: Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* (1975), and Annie Sprinkle's *Post-Porn Modernist* (1989-1996). My rationale for these choices is both personal (they are performances that I particularly enjoy) and considered. Beyond the vaginal connection, the performances I have chosen to write about and consider through the lens of Spiritualist/Debunker performance both inhabit some degree of spiritual expression and magical practice. What is more, they both elicited a particular type of critical response that is similar to the various ways in which debunkers attempted to shut down Spiritualist performances. It is thus a major goal of this chapter to not only place these performances in conversation with Spiritualism, but to extend my analysis of debunker discourse to the performances of what can be termed the totemic "masculine art critic." It is in these ways that this chapter offers a fresh perspective on two performances that have already been written about at length, as I detail in the following section.

(C)lit Review/Cuntribution

The performances I write about in this chapter have already received considerable critical and scholarly attention. Here, I do not attempt to provide an exhaustive literature review, but instead gesture to a few performance theorists and what they have said about the works. Small, focused, and particularly worthy of attention: a (C)lit review, wherein the "C" stands for *caress* (as opposed to the standard *compare*, *contrast*, or *critique* of traditional lit reviews). I aim to touch softly, with love and pleasure, those sources and scholars that have been of particular influence to me. Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* has been read according to the following themes: perspectivalism (i.e. a specific orientation

towards seeing that is aligned with Renaissance perspective in which women are given to be looked at, but not to do the looking); a critique of modernism; a complication of the subject/object divide in art; and the use of the artist's own body in their work.¹⁴⁴

Sprinkle's *Post-Porn Modernist* has also been theorized through the lens of perspectivalism, as well as the themes of: humour as a critical tool; identity performance; deconstruction and critique of sexuality; and the line between pornography and art.¹⁴⁵

Why then, if these pieces have already been written about at length, do I use them as examples here? And why, are they a part of a relatively small group of performance art piece that scholars return to again and again? Historians refer to the ongoing fascination with the Victorian period, and the various ways that ideas borne of that era continue to resonate and have an effect on our lives, as the "Victorian Afterlife." According to that principle, perhaps it makes sense to think about the ghosts of pussy-performances-past. The richness of both Schneemann and Sprinkle's pieces are that they do continue to resonate, as evidenced by this dissertation, and there are still new ways of thinking about them.

Most influential to me are the contributions of Performance Studies scholars Rebecca Schneider and Amelia Jones. I am particularly influenced by Schneider's playful use of language¹⁴⁶ in *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997) where she writes about Sprinkle's performance in relation to her analysis of feminist artists presenting their bodies as dialectical images (52). She writes that, for her, Sprinkle, "sat at the threshold of the 'both/and,' the messy impasse between essentialist and constructivist critiques of gender...[her work] problematically emblematic of the tense stand-off between the literal, material body and her complex ghosting, the symbolic body on 'woman'"

(Schneider 53). Schneider also briefly mentions *Interior Scroll* in her book. In a section on “Primitive Techniques” she touched on the goddess imagery and primitivism of the piece, the “primitivist nostalgia of cultural feminist works” – an analysis that I extend in this chapter (Schneider 131).

In Amelia Jones’ influential *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998) she identifies Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* as a pivotal moment in body art and “the dislocation or decentring of the Cartesian subject of modernism” (1). Jones argues,

Interior Scroll opens up the issue of the potentially heightened effects of *feminist* body art, as well as body-oriented projects by otherwise nonnormative artists who *particularize* their bodies/selves in order to expose and challenge the masculinism embedded in the assumption of “disinterestedness” behind conventional art history and criticism. (Jones 5)

The above quote encapsulates the shift from modernist to postmodernist subjectivity in art. Jones’ placement of body art, and in particularly performance art as the site of this shift, is one of the things that makes *Body Art* so important. Her critique of the hypermasculine posturing of modernist artists and critics has been particularly influential to my formulation of the debunker-as-critic/feminist performance artist configuration that echoes the scientist debunker/Spiritualist dynamics I discuss.

The spiritual elements of *Interior Scroll* and *Post-Porn Modernist* have not received much attention. Rebecca Schneider briefly mentions the spirituality of Sprinkle’s piece, but does not expand upon it. Likewise, in relation to a larger conversation about primitivism Schneider mentions Schneemann and *Interior Scroll*, but she does not follow through with an interrogation of it. In the following sections I provide an overview of the concepts I will elaborate on in my performance analysis.

Performing Feminist Spirituality

The performances I analyze in this chapter both engage with spirituality. This is not to say that they reference contemporary organized religion. Rather, they invoke a type of out-of-time feminist/pagan spirituality that is connected to goddess worship and engages with symbolism of the sacred feminine.¹⁴⁷ A term that arose in my research in relation to Schneemann, and is also a widely used part of the contemporary lexicon surrounding this type of spirituality is “woo woo,” which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as, “Beliefs or practices conventionally regarded as unscientific, irrational, or outlandish, esp. ones relating to spirituality, mysticism, or alternative therapies” (“woo-woo”). Interestingly, the term is used not only by detractors, but also by people who identify with this type of thinking,¹⁴⁸ exemplified by a quote by one of Schneemann’s friends in the section on *Interior Scroll* below. The vagueness, or indeed expansiveness, of the term is useful for describing a set of practices or beliefs that do not fall under a cohesive definition or category. It conveys a feeling rather than a precise definition or set of practices. A “vibe,” if you will. Accordingly, the examples I discuss in this chapter demonstrate a loose engagement with imagery and ideas linked to goddess – as opposed to god – worship. I read this as representative of a certain type of feminist longing, and perhaps fantasy, for a spiritual system that predates patriarchy – one in which women are not only valued, but venerated, their bodies not a site of shame and lack, but a source of power and creation.

This longing can be read, for example, in the work of renowned lesbian poet and theorist Adrienne Rich. In her momentously important work *Of Woman Born* (1976) Rich theorizes the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which she differentiates from

mothering, the actual work of nurturing and caring for children. Alongside this important theoretical work she articulates women's grief with having been largely excluded from written history (what she refers to as the "Great Silence"), and the attendant desire to search for meaning in what she terms "prehistoric" ideals and myths of matriarchy and "Amazonism" (Rich 84-85). Rich writes, "It began to be possible to imagine some universal earlier civilization in which mother-right, not father-right, prevailed; in which matrilineality and matrifocality played a part; in which women were active and admired participants in all of culture; and so to imagine a wholly different way for women to exist in the world" (85). This statement is at once full of indeterminacies ("imagine some...earlier") and yet wholly comprehensible as a seductive idea.

Similar engagement with pre-patriarchal myths and archetypes is the foundation for Clarissa Pinkola Estés' *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1992). In it Estés articulates her idea of a "Wild Woman" – a figure she links to wolves, writing that they share the qualities of being, "keen sensing, playful spirit[s], [with] a heightened capacity for devotion...relational by nature, inquiring, possessed of great endurance and strength. They are deeply intuitive, intensely concerned with their young, their mates, and their pack" (2). Wild women and wolves, Estés argues, are also similarly "hounded, harassed, and falsely imputed" (2). She extends this metaphor across 580 pages, and numerous stories, myths, and fairy tales spanning various cultures. From a twenty first century feminist lens this book can seem at times overly essentialist in the way it ascribes certain behavioural traits (such as nurturing) to biological difference, but the fact remains that it was, and to some degree continues to be,¹⁴⁹ incredibly resonant with liberal North American women. At the time of publication the book spent 145 weeks on the New York

Times Bestseller list and to date has been translated into 35 languages (Mendoza 221).

This speaks to the enormous desire on behalf of women to imagine a type of spirituality that centres their bodies as a site of strength, rather than casts them as less-than.

Feminist theorists have both critiqued feminist spirituality as essentialist and sought to understand it in the context of radical feminist art and activism during the 1970s. In her piece “Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s” (2009) art historian Jennie Klein notes that for artists like Mary Beth Edelson, feminist spirituality and the invocation of goddess imagery in their work was not separate from, but rather an important part of their radical left politics. Klein charts the growth of goddess spirituality in feminist art and writing during the 1970s and attendant downfall in the following decade. She explains that during the 1980s there was a “shift in emphasis [from a more positive reception of goddess imagery in art] among feminist artists and art critics who were influenced by ideas coming out of the United Kingdom” (578).¹⁵⁰ Klein argues that these critics were too hasty in their reevaluation of this work, and claims that, “In the work of Goddess artists, nostalgia and primitivism are deployed strategically to challenge patriarchal limitations placed on women’s bodies” (593). Viewed this way, the essentialism of the work is supposedly *strategic* essentialism – deployed to make a point.

In her 1989 book *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* Diana Fuss uses a feminist post-structuralist perspective to complicate conversations around essentialism. She writes of her, “desire to break or in some way to weaken the hold which the essentialist/constructionist binarism has on feminist theory” (Fuss 1). She does this by demonstrating how, “essentialism is *essential* to social constructivism.” In other words, “the social” and “the natural” are a false binary, in part, because they themselves are both

constructs. Fuss writes, “there is no essence to essentialism... essence *as* irreducible has been *constructed* to be irreducible” (4). Thus, according to Fuss, purely constructivist feminist critiques of essentialism are flawed insofar as they ignore their own dependence on the existence of essentialism; if everything is a construct, contingent on the myriad social factors that influence us, the concept of essentialism is but one of those socially constructed concepts.

Though the explicitly feminist language of 1970s women’s spirituality may be lacking in most cases, spirituality is of continued importance to performance art.¹⁵¹ In particular the way that this spirituality is expressed vis à vis its connection to intuition is emphasized by the multiple contributions by performance artists (including Schneemann, Marina Abramovic, Linda M. Montano, and Karen Finley) to Jennifer Fisher’s anthology *Technologies of Intuition* (2006). Schneemann, for her part, writes, “Intuition contains all that you know” (92). In an interview with Fisher and Jim Drobnick, Marina Abramovich draws a direct line between performance and spirituality when she says, “I think that in order to mean something, art has to have a spiritual point to it. Anything of any importance contains a spiritual dimension, because that’s the state from which creativity originates” (152). She also notes, tellingly, “It’s very dangerous talking about such things publicly, because people will tell you that you’re ‘new age’” (Abramovic 151).

The deeply held resonance of these ideas is traceable in the works of the artists I analyze in this chapter, which I expand upon in the following sections. After all, what is the work of feminist artists if not to help us, recalling Rich’s words, “imagine a wholly different way for women to exist in the world”? If at once understandable, artists engagement with these notions of spirituality are also worthy of deeper critical

examination – for example, one need not dig particularly deep below the surface of these representations to detect an uncomfortable Orientalism. One of the ways this is expressed in the work of these white North American artists is via the cooptation of vaguely Eastern or tribal signifiers. This is related to the New Age spiritual movement, which built on the countercultural ideas of the 1960s, and gained significant traction in the Western world during the 1970s. Under the aegis of the “Age of Aquarius” many Westerners were introduced to elements of Eastern philosophies and spirituality such as meditation and transcendence of the self.¹⁵² By the 1990s practitioners began to distance themselves from the label “New Age” (preferring the more general “spiritual”) but some elements of the movement gained entry to mainstream culture – yoga, for example. Against this cultural and social backdrop a feminist longing for a spirituality disconnected from patriarchy was highly inspirational to artists. It should be noted that Spiritualism is also a spiritual practice that is not necessarily rooted in patriarchal creation myths and baggage. However, what differentiates it from these second-wave feminist conceptions of spirituality is that they specifically rebuke patriarchy, and offer an alternate vision: one that is connected to the earth, women’s bodies and sexuality, and the divine feminine.

The Magic in/of Performance

Magic is generally understood to be the domain of the supernatural, occult, and esoteric, and thus, like Spiritualism, exists outside of scientific epistemologies. In his 1948 book *Magic, Science, and Religion*, influential anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski mined the differences in scientific and magical practice amongst the Trobriand islanders of the western Pacific whom he lived amongst and studied.

Malinowski asserted that in every primitive community¹⁵³ “there have been found two clearly distinguishable domains, the Sacred and the Profane; in other words, the domain of Magic and Religion and that of Science” (17). Clearly those domains extend beyond so-called “primitive” cultures, evident in the science/Spiritualism divide at the centre of my study. Malinowski references the “safety and comfort of magic” that humans turn to in the face of the unknowable, the unaccountable, and unforeseen (30). As in the case of science and Spiritualism, Malinowski notes that,

Nowhere is the duality of natural and supernatural causes divided by a line so thin and intricate, yet, if carefully followed up, so well marked, decisive and instructive, as in the two most fateful forces of human destiny: health and death... To the most rational of civilized men health, disease, and the threat of death, float in a hazy emotional mist. (31-32)

Against this existential threat magic can be understood as emotional salve and desperate recourse to the unknown. Magical thinking is both seductive and wholly human.

My own understanding of magic differs slightly, and touches upon and unites all of the ideas that I have analyzed thus far in this dissertation: performance, embodiment, power, gender, and sexuality. In this context magic is that which cannot be explained, and perhaps most crucially, that which even once explained does not lose its mysterious lustre and awe-inspiring quality. That is because this type of magic is affective. Its primary import is how it makes people feel. Taken this way, the ability to prove or disprove magic through evidence becomes irrelevant. It cannot take the feeling away. Perhaps what is most telling is what counts as, or *feels*, magical, and to whom. Is it a spectacular performance in which the audience is moved, delighted, and entertained? Is it, as I have suggested elsewhere in this dissertation, the ability to create an entirely new life and body

from one's own? Is it the feeling debunkers get when they are able to bury their opponent under a mountain of evidence and demonstrate to everyone how clever they are?

There is queerness to magic, and magic is an essential part of contemporary North American queer culture.¹⁵⁴ Tarot, horoscope, crystals, birth chart readings, and various other practices that might be described or written off as “woo woo” are embraced by many in the queer community.¹⁵⁵ For those on the margins of hegemonic societal practices, an embrace of alternative spirituality can be a powerful thing. It is validating to have belief systems and ways of understanding the universe that exist outside of the world's major patriarchal religions which all denounce homosexuality to some degree or another. As Alexa Winstanley-Smith writes in the article, “Queer Political Astrology: Problems and Potentials”,

queer astrology has come to the fore as an antitraditionalist, anticonservative mode of rethinking human biography in community. The queer astrological model of self-understanding and self-analysis has potential: it is not held in thrall to the perpetually outmoded biological paradigms of scientific “fact,” nor does it require cleaving to secularized but still-fraught figures for the self such as the “martyr,” the “saint,” or the “heretic.”

The affective quality of magic and performance are intricately linked. That is, the emotional heft of the magician's performance is essential to the buy-in on behalf of the audience. Malinowski identifies “the dramatic expression of emotion [as] the essence of [magical] act[s]” and invokes theatricality when he states that, “the emotional state of the [magician] performer, [is] a state which closely corresponds to the situation in which we find it and has to be gone through mimetically” (71). Magic is thus facilitated in large part by the will of the performer, that is, their desire to perform magic. It takes the prompt of “I want to believe” and matches it with “I want to make you believe.” A critical element of this performance is the strategy of the conceal/reveal. The conceal is

protective, anticipatory, and brimming with potential. The reveal is a presentation – spectacular, surprising, and full of delight and awe. The dual act of conceal/reveal broaches the divide of interior/exterior, backstage and onstage, while maintaining that there is such a distinction. When deployed as a clever bit of stagecraft it has the potential to be highly dramatic: the trick up your sleeve, the rabbit in your hat, the ectoplasm in your pussy. What once was not visible is made so by the magic of the performer. Ta-dah!

The “ah-ha!” of the debunker is similarly an appeal to the magical potential of performance (though he may purport to be doing precisely the opposite of that, pointing to evidence and reason which nonetheless is often presented in a decidedly *dramatic* fashion). In fact, there is fascinating link between magicians and debunkers, and in particular Spiritualism. Perhaps the loudest (and yes, most dramatic¹⁵⁶) Spiritualist debunker was famed magician Harry Houdini. As mentioned in the conclusion of the previous chapter Houdini weighed in on the Crawford/Goligher case, and was friends with E.E. Fournier d’Albe. Houdini was renowned for using his knowledge of magic to undermine Spiritualist performers.¹⁵⁷ In what was essentially a case of “con recognizing con” he put his considerable skills and knowledge of performance, in particular the art of close magic and misdirection, to the task of debunking Spiritualists (Fig. 37).¹⁵⁸ These instances of Spiritualist call-outs can be read as a performer on performer critique – essentially, “I know those tricks, and you are not doing them well or compelling enough to trick me.”¹⁵⁹ The reveal in this case, then, is Houdini revealing a fellow performer as so-called fraud. As in the case of other debunkers, this is also revealing of Houdini’s own biases, motivations, and sense of self, in particular his masculinity.¹⁶⁰ A consideration of



Fig. 37. Harry Houdini performance poster, circa 1909. Houdini's framing of debunking as a show emphasizes the performative elements. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

magic opens up a rich site of potential analysis. In the following sections of this chapter I broach the question: how did Sprinkle and Schneemann engage with notions of magic in their performances?

The Debunker as Critic

The performances in this chapter elicited various negative critical responses on behalf of the public, legislators, and art world insiders. There are multiple intersecting reasons for this: the explicit use of the female body, the identities of the performers themselves, and antitheatrical and anti performance art sentiment. The critic is similar to

the debunker in that he engages in performances of knowledge and authority in order to denigrate these women's performances. In particular, his performances go beyond mere critique or disagreement, with the active goal of stopping the performances through various attempts to defund or turn public opinion against them.

The history of publicly funded art is full of efforts to censure artists whose work is deemed provocative, or against the interest of a certain subsection of the populace. Perhaps the most notable example of this is the case of the so-called "NEA Four" – four performance artists whose work was at the centre of a culture-war style debate about arts funding in the United States. In 1990 performance artists Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller and John Fleck had their National Endowment of the Arts grant proposals vetoed by then-NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer on the basis of their subject matter, which was termed indecent by Republican lawmakers (it is notable that Hughes, Miller, and Fleck were all queer). The scene for this was set a year earlier in 1989 when conservative lawmakers had taken an interest in NEA funding following two controversial works, Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* and Robert Mapplethorpe's *The Perfect Moment*. The NEA Four successfully sued the National Endowment of the Arts. Finley's case, which made its way to the Supreme Court, was ultimately ruled in favour of the NEA.¹⁶¹

As I will expand upon in the following sections, Sprinkle faced backlash to her performances from debunker-critics, who sought to both undermine and defund her work. Schneemann, on the other hand, engages with the figure of debunker-as-critic in an interesting way in that a significant portion of the piece itself is a response to critical attacks on her work. In doing so, she offers her own critique of the masculinist art world.

Schneemann: Revealing Her Interior

It would be remiss of me to write a chapter about feminist vaginal performance art without including a discussion of Carolee Schneemann's touchstone piece, *Interior Scroll* (1975/77). Schneemann first performed the piece at the 1975¹⁶² *Women Here and Now* conference in East Hampton, New York, and then again two years later at the 1977 Telluride Film Festival in Telluride, Colorado. By this point in her career Schneemann had already established herself as multi-disciplinary artist whose works spanned performance, experimental film, painting, sculpture, and writing. Perhaps most notable at that time was her 1964 piece *Meat Joy*, a ritualistic performance – described by Schneemann as having “the character of an erotic rite: excessive, indulgent: a celebration of flesh as material” – in which she and seven other performers (James Tenney, Robert David Cohen, Tom O'Donnell, Stanley Gochenouer, Irina Posner, Dorothea Rockburne, and Sandra J. Chew) writhed around on the ground in raw fish, chickens, sausages and paint at Judson Dance Theatre in New York (“Meat Joy, 1964”).

The two performances of *Interior Scroll* differed slightly, but both involved Schneemann performing the ritualistic actions of entering the space wearing a sheet that she removed to reveal her naked body (not dissimilar to the reveal of a burlesque performer), and painting her body with large brush strokes of mud. For the climax of the piece Schneemann read from a self-authored feminist text that was written on a long, tightly wound strip of paper that she had inserted into her vagina. Schneemann then read from the scroll as she slowly unfurled it from her body (Fig. 38). The performance ended once she had removed the scroll and finished reading. The resulting material object of the scroll (which appears to be covered in tape, almost like a strip of film, probably to keep



Fig. 38. *Interior Scroll*, 1975. *Women Artists Here and Now*, East Hampton, NY. Photograph by Anthony McCall. © The Carolee Schneemann Foundation. Reproduced with permission.

the paper from dissolving in the wetness of her vagina) is crumpled, and smeared with what appears to be menstrual blood (Fig. 39).

The major difference between the 1975 and 1977 performances was in what Schneemann read. In the 1975 performance she read a portion of a text she had written in 1966 and later published in her book *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter* (1975). In the manifesto-style passage, Schneemann expounds on her experience as a woman in the male-dominated art world. She writes, in part,

BE PREPARED:

to have your brain picked
to have the pickings misunderstood
to be mistreated whether your success
increases or decreases
to have detraction move with admiration—in step
to have your time wasted
your intentions distorted
the simplest relationships in your thoughts twisted
to be USED and MISUSED (“Text from Interior Scroll, 1975”)



Fig. 39. Scroll from Carolee Schneemann’s performance of *Interior Scroll*, 1975, at the Telluride Film Festival, Colorado, September 4, 1977. © The Carolee Schneemann Foundation. Reproduced with permission.

In the 1977 performance Schneemann chose to read a portion of the text from her film *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973-1978). This version goes beyond the more general feminist frustrations of the earlier performance to recount an interaction with “a happy man, a structuralist filmmaker”¹⁶³ who had written off Schneemann as a filmmaker because of the “persistence of feelings...the diaristic indulgence” of her work (“Text from Interior Scroll, 1975”). Here the invocation of feelings and the reference to a diary (an acceptable place for those feelings implies this critic, so long as they are private) are an attack on the strongly feminine coded aspects of Schneemann’s work.

Beyond the use of vaginal space, a major area of overlap with Kathleen Goligher’s performances is what remains unchanged despite vast differences in time, space, and context. What unites the two performances is the misogynistic culture(s) into which they were born. The enormous difference between them is that unlike Goligher whose body/self/story were not fully her own, Schneemann’s use of her body to deliver her feminist critique is a powerful claim to and declaration of her gendered embodiment, wit, and artistic acumen. Schneemann did not need a Crawford – she speaks for herself, from the cunt. The critic, in this case is a stand-in for the debunker, for what else could they have intended than to dissuade Schneemann from her work when they told her “don’t ask us to look at your films. We cannot. There are certain films we cannot look at” (“Text from Interior Scroll, 1975”). This phrasing is similar to the debunkers of Spiritualism, whose tone is condescending and dismissive. The unnamed modernist art critic who addresses Schneemann performs a similar dismissal of her work in service of performing authority with respect to controlling knowledge and instilling disbelief. The critic is the arbiter of what constitutes legitimate art, and their refusal to even *consider*

Schneemann's work acts as judgement of it, and a signal to others that it is fraudulent. In her essay on 1970s feminist art Jennie Klein notes that "feminist spirituality – particularly Goddess Feminism – was almost more troubling to feminist critics and academics than it was to the male avant-garde" (579). This appears to be echoed in Schneemann's experience with the critic. The significance lies in how easy it was for him (or her) to write off Schneemann's film work, and in how hard she apparently took that (the efficacy of the attack is evident in Schneemann's words – "the simplest relationship in your thoughts twisted"). This complicates the narrative of *Interior Scroll* as feminist triumph. Schneemann was deeply affected by the dismissal of her work by men she seemingly really wanted to be in a "club" with.

By incorporating her critic's words into her performance Schneemann speaks back to the debunker-as-critic – in effect offering an embodied debunking of the debunker.¹⁶⁴ By invoking the critic who signifies the misogyny of the wider art world Schneemann foregrounds the sexism faced by woman artists like her at the time. Schneemann also countered the masculine authority of the debunker-critic by constructing and enforcing her own authority. In "Tracing a History of Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*" art historian Victoria Horne describes how Schneemann "passionately orchestrated her own entry into history" (1002) (a kind of birthing of professional self) through the deliberate acts of building her own archive, managing and disseminating the documentation of her own works, and maintaining correspondences with select writers and critics who she believed understood her work.

An element of Schneemann's performance that is less discussed but nonetheless evident in *Interior Scroll* is the particular brand of feminist spirituality and magic she

brought to the work. In fact, when you look at Schneemann's oeuvre it is everywhere – an ongoing engagement with Earth mother and goddess imagery borne out of the contemporary Cultural Feminism movement, the witchy attachment to cats who featured prominently in many of her pieces (*Fuses* (1964-65), *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973-76), *Vesper's Stampede to My Holy Mouth* (1991), *Infinity Kisses* (1991) (Fig. 40), *Mysteries of the Pussies* (1998)). In an interview with Schneemann's friend Kathy Brew as a part



Fig. 40. *Infinity Kisses (I)*, 1981-1987. Xerox ink on linen, 84 x 72 inches. © The Carolee Schneemann Foundation. Reproduced with permission.

of the Carolee Schneemann Oral History project, Brew notes that the two shared an interest in the “woo-woo... Carolee and I connected with some more esoteric thinking” (“*Carolee Schneemann Oral History Interview*” 5). Referring to Schneemann having described the two of them as witches, Crew continued, “Carolee was very attuned to some paranormal and psychic phenomena... We both tapped into that sensibility. So maybe that’s why we were the witches” (“*Carolee Schneemann Oral History Interview*” 10). In her piece “On Intuition,” Schneemann explains, “My occult influences have pagan roots. As a four-year-old, my Scottish nanny would wake me up for prayers and evocations. Staring at the full moon, I was able to see my grandfather’s face emerge, our secret” (92).

Schneemann incorporated her spirituality into *Interior Scroll*, which is laden with feminist goddess symbolism. From the life giving potential of the female body, in which artistic creation is situated in the vagina and thus likened to maternal creation, to the imagery of serpents – a motif she repeated across works (Fig. 41). In her book *More than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings* Schneemann expanded upon her interpretation of serpent imagery,

From my identification with the symbolism of the female body, I made the further assumption that carvings and sculptures of the serpent shape were attributes of the Goddess and would have been made by women worshippers (artists) as analogous to their own physical, sexual knowledge. I thought of the vagina in many ways – physically, conceptually; as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation. I saw the vagina as a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model: enlivened by its passage from the visible to the invisible, a spiraled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries, attributes of both female and male sexual powers.” (234)

Performance theorist Rebecca Schneider noted the essentialist impulses of Schneemann's work and how different generations of feminist critics interpreted them. In *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997) she writes,

Schneemann's essentialism was most obvious in her goddess imagery – snakes placed across her body in *Eye/Body* were allusions to the Goddess. But that essentialism was tinged with declarations of her own agency – her status as constructor, artist, active creator. She upset feminists on both sides of the essentialist/materialist divide. Rigidly essentialist feminists, such as the Heresies collective in the 1960s, chastised Schneemann for debasing the Goddess with what they read as sexual narcissism in her work. Twenty years later, strictly materialist feminists similarly dismissed Schneemann's work, reading any gestures toward goddess-identified sacrality as always already nostalgic and therefore naively apolitical.” (Schneider 36-37)



Fig. 41. *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera*, 1963. Gelatin silver prints, 24 x 20 inches each. Photographs by Erró. © The Carolee Schneemann Foundation. Reproduced with permission.

While I agree with the above mentioned materialist feminist analysis that Schneemann's engagement with goddess imagery has a nostalgia to it, I would not write it off as apolitical, nor worthy of dismissal. Instead, it is valuable to consider as a distinctly political response by a woman at a particular time and place in history, and one that is not altogether incomprehensible. It is clear that Schneemann was looking to the distant (and perhaps fantastical) past in an attempt to find inspiration, and justification, for what she knew in her body to be true: that women can create not only children (a role which under patriarchy has shackled us) but also profound, important art. This was and is the allure of Cultural Feminism – the message that not only are women not *less* or the site of literal (phallic) *lack*, as we have been told, but that in our very womanhood (an obviously complex term that has shifted and expanded but in this cultural moment very much meant to be living with a female body) we are in fact *more*. Not merely subjugated mortals, but actual *goddesses*. This is both a rich site of affirmation and a place from which to imagine feminist futures. If at one time there were goddess-worshipping societies, then patriarchy is not the natural order of things, and perhaps we could go back to a way of life that not only valued, but venerated women.

Beyond the imagery of the serpent, coiled and extended from Schneemann's vagina bringing forth an act of artistic creation (with a venomous bite of feminist critique), spirituality is invoked elsewhere in the performance. I am particularly struck by Schneemann's ritualized gesture of painting the contours of her body and face in mud or paint.¹⁶⁵ The markings have a sort of tribal primitivism to them that I read as being related to the all-too-common aesthetic of twentieth and twenty-first century white Western women who embrace woo woo/earth mother/goddess spirituality. These often

include a vague gesture towards Eastern spirituality that is highly aestheticized, decontextualized and exoticizing, what religious studies scholar Amanda J. Lucia in her study of festivals like Burning Man refers to as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR).¹⁶⁶ Think white ladies doing yoga, burning sage, and picking and choosing elements of spiritual practice to fetishize while glossing over the substance and context of those beliefs. It appears, then, as an Orientalist fantasy – a link between these imagined pre-patriarchal societies and the more contemporary Eastern religious practices. The primitive-coded markings could have perhaps been referencing a critique that Schneemann read from the scroll – that same “structuralist filmmaker” had referred to her work as exhibiting “primitive techniques.” And yet I do not believe this was the case. Schneemann had painted her body in other works (for example, *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* [1963]), which often blurred the distinction between art “object” and artist’s body. This instance could have been both an exploration of form, body, and gesture, and reference to her spiritual beliefs.

Despite the elements in Schneemann’s work that portray nostalgia for a loosely articulated (and perhaps idyllic or imagined) past, that same spiritual impulse made her cast her gaze into the future. The artist becomes the fortune-teller. In a 1977 anthology titled *Women in the Year 2000* (ed. Maggie Tripp) Schneemann wrote,

[By the year 2000] the shadowy notions of a harmonious core of civilization under the aegis of the Great Mother Goddess, where the divine unity of female biological and imaginative creation was normal and pervasive, where the female was the source of all living and created images, will once again move to clarify our own conscious desires. The scared rituals of forming materials to embody life energies will return to the female source. (“Women in the Year 2000”)

Alas, as any woman who was alive in the year 2000 can tell you, this did not come to be. Here then, perhaps, is the naiveté that the aforementioned materialist feminists criticized Schneemann for.

And yet, she was clearly on to something. In 1975/77 when Schneemann pulled that magic trick of producing a feminist critique out of her pussy, she (perhaps unwittingly¹⁶⁷) stepped into the role of the Medium. Whereas Kathleen Goligher's vagina acted as the portal between the living and the dead, Schneemann's similar gesture and its lasting impact opened up a connection between her mind/body and those of generations of feminist artists and scholars who would come after her. Troubling the linear formulation of influencer/influenced is the expansive magic of queer feminist temporality, which allows us to traverse time, space, and realms in connecting with the lives and experiences of other women across various iterations of feminist thought. It is inter-temporal intersectionality. That certain elements of Schneemann's work contain politics that may feel problematic to today's viewers, or read as anachronistic in the context of contemporary feminism, makes the performance no less alluring. In *Time Binds* (2010) Elizabeth Freeman writes about the queer politics of time and articulates the concept of temporal drag, a term she uses to explain the ways that past experiences, and in particular past iterations of feminism (even, or perhaps especially ones that may elicit a form of disidentification¹⁶⁸), continue to influence and shape current actions and identifications. Freeman describes identity as "always in temporal drag, constituted and haunted by the failed love-project that precedes it... [it is] not simply performative or citational but physical and even erotic" (93). Temporal drag casts previous incarnations of feminism, like that of Schneemann's work, as "objects of longing...they suggest the

thrill and power that a discounted [or if not discounted, a now problematized] past ...can bring to a much more slick contemporary moment” (Freeman 89). Contemporary feminists’ ongoing engagement with Schneemann’s performance (including this dissertation) is temporal drag, and is an ideal match for what Freeman terms erotohistoriography, a method that,

admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations. (95-96)

When one reaches through time to clasp hands, as if in séance, with Goligher and Schneemann, one is “*feeling* history”. It is an invitation to touch them, to read their pussies, and perhaps to touch your own pussy (that is, to engage in the autoeroticism of both Goligher and Schneemann’s vaginal acts).

Annie Sprinkle: Post-Porn Modernist Magician

The second performance that I analyze in this chapter is Annie Sprinkle’s *Post-Porn Modernist* (1989-1996). Sprinkle, a sex worker and former porn actress who made the transition to artist in the 1980s,¹⁶⁹ first staged the show at the Harmony Theatre in New York City in 1989. She would go on to tour the show extensively throughout the Unites States, Canada, Europe and Australia before retiring it in 1996 (Fig. 42). The one-woman show charted her trajectory from “excruciatingly shy” Ellen Steinberg to “fearless” porn actress and sex worker Annie Sprinkle, to “ancient” Anya, her tantric sex goddess “neo sacred prostitute”¹⁷⁰ persona. On a stage set-dressed as a boudoir Sprinkle used humour and wit to detail her exploits in the sex work industry, and blur the line



Fig. 42. A 1993 poster for the Amsterdam performances of *Post-Porn Modernist* (designer unknown). Via The Atria Knowledge Institute for Emancipation and Women’s History. Reproduced with permission.

between art and pornography by performing such acts as masturbating, douching, sucking dildos, and urinating on stage. She also touched on more serious issues surrounding sexuality – her personal connection to the ongoing AIDS crisis at the time, women’s agency in sex work, and the complicated and ongoing negotiation between persona and self, which act as important context for the piece. The performance artefacts I work from in this section are a version of the script from 1994 and a video recording of a 1993 Los Angeles performance that is archived online in the NYU Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library.¹⁷¹

During the show Sprinkle performed scientist, debunker, spirituality, and magic. In structuring the performance in the format of a lecture, she inhabits the role of educator and participates in a traditional form of knowledge production and transmission that is tied to scientific knowledge and medical performance.¹⁷² Sprinkle uses props and visual

aides associated with lecturing such as charts and diagrams (Fig. 43), and performs physical demonstrations akin to those of nineteenth century science lectures (albeit whereas Tyndall demonstrated physics, Sprinkle shows the audience how to fellate a dildo). As with Schneemann's piece, *Post-Porn Modernist* received considerable critical backlash. I extend my argument of the critic-as-debunker here, and analyze conservative legislator attempts to shut the show down and use it as an argument for defunding the arts. Alternately, Sprinkle performs both spirituality and spiritual/embodied knowing through the goddess masturbation ritual (expanded upon below) that closes the show. There are also, of course, various instances of the conceal/reveal. Where the sexual elements of Kathleen Goligher's performances were implied, this is explicit (and a product of *very* different contexts, historical periods, places, and performers). The self-evident conceal/reveal of Sprinkle's striptease/costume and prop reveals (from "ugly flannel nightgown" to sexy latex costume at the beginning of the show when she is detailing her transition from Ellen Steinberg to the persona Annie Sprinkle. It is the corseted and latex-clad Sprinkle who delivers the lecture, not the frumpy Ellen –



Fig. 43. Photograph from *Post-Porn Modernist* depicting Sprinkle showing the audience a diagram of a cervix. © Annie Sprinkle. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

costuming being an important element of properly holding the audience's attention) exist alongside the deeper personal and emotional revelations of the autobiographical show. Many of these disclosure-based reveals challenge hegemonic images of a sex worker, for example the story of her happy and mutually satisfying ongoing 17 year sex work relationship with her favourite client Murray (a magic "trick"?). Elsewhere, she reveals she is published, and "a pretty good writer" – a downplaying of her intelligence that purports to pander to specific audience expectations, yet is disproven through the intelligence of the show itself.

Sprinkle's scientific and medical performance is a major framework for the first part of the show, which takes the format of a public lecture (albeit one against the backdrop of a boudoir). Between autobiographical insights she delivers pieces of genuine sexual education, presenting as a somewhat raunchy take on the role of science communicator. She both highlights and pokes fun at the audience's presumed lack of knowledge surrounding elements of female sexuality; while displaying a chart of the reproductive system she leads the audience in a call and response: "let's all say that together, shall we? Va-gi-nal ca-nal, u-ter-us." Though this call and response moment is more suggestive of a primary school teacher than a lecturer, it emphasizes a juvenile and uninformed attitude towards sexuality that is a by-product of puritanical cultures (think schoolchildren snickering at the mention of the words "vagina" or "penis"). Sprinkle's scientist/educator here is decidedly self aware and self-deprecating.¹⁷³ She cites sexuality researchers Masters and Johnson while comparing the cumulative height of cocks she has sucked against the height of the Empire State Building (Fig. 44). And yet her show does perform the genuine function of demystifying parts of human sexuality, and sex

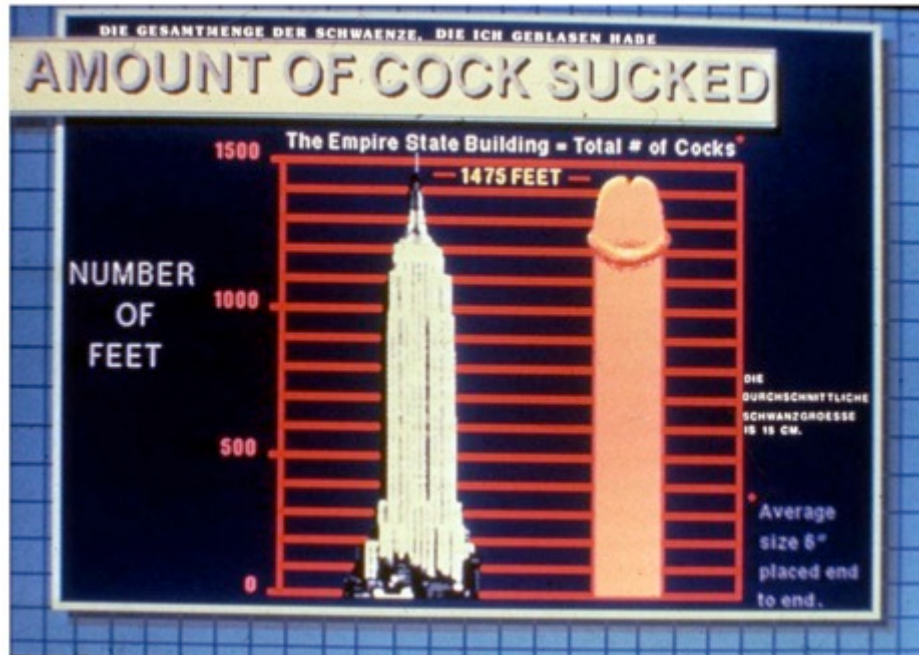


Fig. 44. Graphic from *Post-Porn Modernist* comparing “amount of cocks sucked” to the height of the Empire State Building. © Annie Sprinkle. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

work. For example, by alternating the pitch of her voice she emphasizes the performative femininity that underlies the gender dynamics of many heterosexual relationships and uphold the fantasies that sex workers stage – when the wig and heels are on, she uses her breathy, high pitched sex worker voice, and in other instances, stripped of those she speaks more like herself.

Sprinkle’s public science educator persona is perhaps most on display during the famous “Public Cervix Announcement” portion of her show. The metonymic title refers to the educational act whereby she inserts a speculum into her vagina and invites audience members to line up and, using flashlights, take a look (Fig. 45). In inviting this gaze, which blurs the boundaries between scientific and scopophilic looking, Sprinkle challenges the mystery and opaqueness of women’s sexuality. She invites the audience to fill a potential gap in their knowledge by looking into her hole. This gap remains an



Fig. 45. An audience member using a flashlight to view Sprinkle’s cervix during the *Public Cervix Announcement* portion of the show. © Annie Sprinkle. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

ongoing issue that has serious implications for women’s health – a 2021 study published in the *International Urogynecology Journal* found “poor public understanding of external female genital anatomy” in the UK (El-Hamamsy et al.). By performing her own pelvic exam Sprinkle scrambles the doctor/patient, scientist/specimen boundary. By inviting the audience to look, the scientific divide of subject who studies vs. object who is studied is smashed by self-display. Sprinkle here is far removed from the women who have been observed in medical lecture halls throughout history; her gynaecological display cannot be separated from her personhood – this is *her* cunt, and she is both inviting you to look and cracking jokes as you do.¹⁷⁴ The ease with which she performs the manoeuvre of speculum-insertion speaks to the scrappy resourcefulness of sex workers who want and/or need to take their sexual health into their own hands, outside of the judgement-laden patriarchal medical institution. There is an element of control, and perhaps even pleasure to it. Speculum insertion by a medical professional is generally uncomfortable

and often painful. Sprinkle can rely on her own biofeedback, and perhaps even the lubricative quality of exhibitionism to help her (at one point in the performance she coos in her breathy baby-voice “cameras are such a turn on”).

The term *speculum* is borrowed from the Latin, meaning, “to look.” It is also a word that since at least the 1650s has referred to “A mirror or reflector (of glass or metal) used for some scientific purpose; a lens” (“*Speculum*”). Sprinkle’s use of the *speculum* to display her cervix in effect held a mirror up to audience members; gazing deep into her vagina allowed them (and their fellow audience members) to see *themselves*. Were they surprised, delighted, disgusted? Did they even bother (or dare) getting up from their seat? Rebecca Schneider writes extensively about this element of the performance in *The Explicit Body in Performance*, commenting, “whether one chose to remain seated, or joined in the line of expectations, everyone had the opportunity to observe their own choices” (53). Anticipating/commenting on these potential reactions to her vagina Sprinkle performed a *douche*¹⁷⁵ on stage before displaying her cervix (Fig. 46). She performed it as comedic, but the ritual washing speaks to the commonplace *vaginaphobia* – better not to present a vagina how it actually is, what with its messy, smelly secretions and blood (no *ectoplasm* in sight though). In what – in the context of my work – here feels like throwback to Kathleen Goligher’s era, Sprinkle quips, “Wasn’t so long ago you couldn’t wear your dress above your ankles...Now you can *douche* on stage.” Sprinkle also skewered this misogyny remarking as she reclined, legs splayed, in a chair, “I wanna prove to some of the group there are no teeth in there,” referencing the *vagina dentata*, a misogynist myth that encapsulates male fears about the female body. In her book *On Flinching: Theatricality and Scientific Looking from Darwin to Shell Shock* Tiffany Watt



Fig. 46. Sprinkle douches onstage before her *Public Cervix Announcement*. © Annie Sprinkle. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

Smith writes about “the times recoiling and cringing are self-consciously enacted responses” (3). Sprinkles performance invites scientific looking, and also sets the trap for a potential “flinch” that will give the spectator away.

Shifting my own gaze from the scientific back to the spiritual, much of *Post-Porn Modernist* engages with spirituality. Like Schneemann, Sprinkle is clearly very taken with goddess/sacred feminine imagery, and the final act of the show – a masturbation goddess ritual – is completely structured by it. Sprinkle performs her spirituality via the persona “Anya” (and arguably through the earth-loving lesbian identity that she has presented in her life and work since PPM – see for example her *Ecosex Manifesto*). Sprinkle tells the audience that Anya was born out of a spiritual awakening that accompanied the AIDs-related death of her lover Marco. Desiring to connect sexually

while keeping Sprinkle (who was HIV negative) safe, the two developed an interest in tantric sex. This and the brush with death/loss of Marco, led Sprinkle/Anya to adopt a mystical approach to sex that was rooted in the spiritual and the cosmic. While *Post-Porn Modernist* has been written about extensively, it has not been read through the lens of spirituality. This speaks to the uncomfortable essentialism that elements of the piece brush up against. For feminist scholars drawn to the performance as a rich site of critical engagement and deconstruction, this essentialism has been tossed out in favour of more palatable readings such as the shift in visual perspective (i.e. who is doing the looking, and who is the subject of that gaze) that Sprinkle so delightfully ushers in. Interestingly, Sprinkle herself draws a line between her spiritual and feminist selves. In a section of the piece that mirrors the opening monologue Sprinkle compares her current and future personas, stating, “Annie Sprinkle is a feminist, Anya is a goddess.” Perhaps omnipotent beings have no need for politics. Or perhaps she had been put off by the criticism by second-wave anti-pornography/sex work feminists (who would no doubt criticise the essentialism of the Anya persona who, for example, links spiritual power to menstruation).

There is a marked tonal shift in this final act of the performance away from the lecture mode and into something more akin to that of a spiritual leader. It is humorous – but not in the way that the rest of the show is – and you get the sense that this is the part Sprinkle is most serious about. Indeed, on her website she writes, “Of all the things I’ve ever done in my life, this ‘performance’ was the most important and enlightening” (“Masturbation Onstage”). From a twenty-first century vantage point it is also a bit cringe inducing in that way that the vague, and sometimes culturally insensitive, “woo woo” of

it all is expressed. Present are the uncomfortable elements of a white woman inhabiting/appropriating symbolism that is vaguely Eastern in origin, which was common in this period and in the wider embrace of yoga and other Asian and Indigenous “wellness” practices. It is a pastiche of imagery pulled from Indian, Chinese, and Native American cultural practices, all of which she describes as, “past cultures who were much more sexually advanced than ours today.” Incense, candles, a copper bowl containing ghee and dried cow dung, and a new-agey soundscape transform the stage into an altar (Fig. 47). Sprinkle makes repeated use of a gesture – her arms out to the side bent at right angles, palms facing upwards – that is vaguely reminiscent of Indian dance or the poses of the Mahavidyas, the group of ten Hindu tantric goddesses (Kinsley). All of this serves to reinforce/underlie the exoticism of Orientalism (eroticism of exoticism?). Perhaps then



Fig. 47. Sprinkle, as Anya, performing the goddess masturbation ritual. © Annie Sprinkle. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

it is appropriate that the recording I viewed was made at a performance in Los Angeles – a city that is both an epicentre of performance and well known for its embrace of “woo woo” new age-yness;¹⁷⁶ a place where spirituality is often divorced of its original context and co-opted by the Western consumer.¹⁷⁷

At the beginning of the ritual Sprinkle tells the audience,

Women and sometimes men, from ancient cultures in Mesopotamia, Sumeria, Egypt and Greece devoted their lives to learning the art of sexual ecstasy. Sex was very different for them than it is for most of us today. In the temples, the main elements of sex were prayer, healing, ritual, and meditation. It was believed that the best time to connect with the Divine, to get visions, and create miracles was when you were in a state of sexual ecstasy.

Embodying what she terms the “Neo Sacred Prostitute” Sprinkle frames the following part of the performance, where she masturbates to orgasm, as a spiritual act. This too is where the magic comes in. Using her trusty magic wand vibrator Sprinkle/Anya becomes priestess, shaman, Medium. In her ecstatic state she conjures not only an orgasm, but opens up a connection between the living (libidinal) and the dead – the ancient priestesses she channels, and the deceased lover who inspired her spiritual transformation. Like a séance with the clasping of hands this too is a communal performance. The audience members are given rattles and encouraged to shake them, contributing to the build of energy in the room until Sprinkle/Anya reaches ecstasy. In cumming on stage she performs an embodied form of knowledge (what her body is capable of and knows how to do) and reveals the (to some) esoteric/magical knowledge of what a female orgasm looks like. This is feminized magic (Houdini could never). She also, interestingly, links the display to scientific experimentation and learning, writing of the performance,

When so many people are witnessing you, it makes every little thing big and clear. I was taking something that’s usually done alone in the dark, putting it under a micro-scope, and shining beautiful theatrical light on it so we could all

look at it together. The theater setting became a laboratory in which to experiment; sex became a microcosm for all of life. (“Masturbating on Stage”)

What the masturbation ritual also puts under a microscope (or indeed, like the *Public Cervix Announcement*, holds a speculum/mirror up to) is the audience reactions.

Reflecting on the performance Sprinkle writes,

Needless to say, this was the part of the show people either loved the most or hated the most. Some people were totally uncomfortable watching me. They became disgusted and even got angry. Some insisted that masturbation should only be done in private. Other people reported they felt love and compassion, received inspiration, had a realization, or had powerful feelings come up. (“Masturbating on Stage”)

These varied, but in particular negative, receptions to the work are where the idea of debunker-as-critic comes in.

As a sex worker and porn actress Sprinkle was no stranger to censorship. She jokingly refers to this partway through *Post-Porn Modernist* when she invites an audience member on stage to hold one of her legs open while she performs a “good old fashioned spread shot.”¹⁷⁸ After fingering herself for a few moments Sprinkle says with a knowing wink, “we better stop, they might lose government funding” (referring perhaps to the theatre owners.) While tossed off as a funny comment, this was in reference to real events. Sprinkle and her work got caught up in the charged debates surrounding government arts funding that had started in 1989 with challenges to the NEA by conservative lawmakers. On February 5, 1990 Republican congressman Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (Fig. 48) – representing the state of California, and leader of the anti-NEA campaign in the house – distributed a “Dear Colleague” letter to all 435 members of the House of Representatives. The “Dear Colleague” letter is a form of official



Fig. 48. Photographic evidence that Rohrabacher has been punchable since at least the 80s. President Reagan faking a punch to Congressman Dana Rohrabacher aboard an Air Force One trip to California on 26 November 1986. Rohrabacher worked as a speechwriter for Reagan at the time. Public domain, via The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

correspondence practiced in the House, and a way for members of congress to drum up support or opposition for various causes. Rohrabacher's letter can be read as a debunker text. Like the debunkers of Spiritualism, Rohrabacher's missive was an extension of fantasies of male control,¹⁷⁹ with a stated goal of shutting down the performance. And like a debunker text, Rohrabacher's letter can be analyzed as a performance itself. The letter opens with a quote attributed to Sprinkle (though it is absent from the script and very well may have been a fabrication): "Usually I get paid a lot of money for this, but tonight it's government funded!" – Annie Sprinkle: 'Post-Porn Modernist' and Tax Dollar Recipient, after experiencing orgasm on stage." Rohrabacher reveals himself to be a bit of a showman with his all-capitals header: "THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT OF THE ARTS IS AT IT AGAIN!" The letter is relatively short, and worth representing here in full. It reads,

Dear Colleague,

Does the following performance sound like an appropriate use of tax dollars to you?

Star of 150 explicit, XXX-rated videos, Annie Sprinkle takes to the stage and

- Masturbates with various “sex toys” until she experiences orgasm.
- Performs oral sex with rubber penises, inviting the audience to massage her breasts.
- To conclude her performance, she opens her vaginal canal with a gynaecological tool known as a speculum and invites audience members to the stage to inspect her.

Okay, now, hold on to your hats...and your wallet. Annie Sprinkle’s titillating masterpiece received your constituents’ tax dollars, in the following manner:

The New York Council for the Arts receives \$500,000 in unrestricted funds from the National Endowment for the Arts every year. In turn, the Council chose to spend \$25,000 on a performance series at the Kitchen Theatre in New York. “Annie Sprinkle: Post-Porn Modernist” was performed twelve times during the series.

A “Post-Porn Modernist Manifesto,” printed in the show’s program, is written by “artists” who “celebrate sex as the nourishing life giving force... We embrace our genitals as part, not separate, from our spirits... We utilize sexually explicit words, pictures and performances to communicate our ideas and emotions.”

Unfortunately, they are also utilizing taxpayer dollars.

Once again, of course, NEA backers are calling opponents of the Annie Sprinkle Show “censors” because we don’t believe that Annie has a First Amendment right to taxpayers’ dollars.

The executive director of The Kitchen, Bobbi Tsumagari, defended the “artistic quality” of Sprinkle’s performance, defining the show as “a critical look at Sprinkle’s personal experiences dealing with some of the most important issues of our time...”

Mr. John Frohnmayer, the Chairman of the NEA, defended the grant, saying “The point is we are not the moral arbiter of this country. We’re not going to run around and respond just because something happened somewhere that someone didn’t like.”

Let’s remind Mr. Frohnmayer he is dealing with taxpayer funds and is accountable for how they are spent, just like every other head of every other federal agency.

If the NEA can’t hold itself responsible to the U.S. taxpayer, it’s our job to make them responsible.

Sincerely,

Dana Rohrabacher

Member of Congress (reprinted in Bolton 147-48)

Hold on to your hats (...and your wallet) and clutch your pearls! Ironically, considering his argument, Rohrabacher's letter was also clearly designed to titillate (how many congressmen immediately went home and tried to find out more about the show?). Specifically, what likens it to the other debunker texts I have analyzed in previous chapters is the condescension and mocking tone (for example, referring to Sprinkle as an "artist," and her performance as a masterpiece). As with many debunker texts, the end goal of the letter was to humiliate the performer and prevent their performance by questioning the legitimacy of it. The tone is that of disapproving paternalism tinged with moral indignity; whereas Spiritualist debunkers claimed to be performing their debunkings of behalf of grieving families who were vulnerable to deceit and fraud, right leaning lawmakers like Rohrabacher claimed the fiscal and moral high ground on behalf of the "vulnerable" taxpayer.

Sprinkle's excellent response to the congressman's challenge was published two weeks later in the delightfully titled *Los Angeles Times* story, "Queen of Kink Not Taking It Lying Down." Sprinkle is quoted as saying, "My (tax) money goes to a lot of things I don't like. I'm paying for nuclear bombs. I'm paying for wars... My tax dollars are going for art that I think is really stupid and boring and trivial" (Stewart). In fact, no federal or state arts council money did go towards *Post-Porn Modernist*. Sprinkle has commented elsewhere that, "The sex industry [is what] funded a lot of performance for me" (Meier). Still, she was dragged into the NEA-centred arts funding debate and held up as an example by the religious right. On February 13, 1990 the American Family Association (AFA) placed a two page fundraising advertisement in the *Washington Times*. The Rev.

Donald Wildmon was the director of the Christian organization, and at the time was helping lead the campaign against the NEA. The advertisement used the same Sprinkle “quote” about her orgasm being government funded, and declared her art “anti-Christian.” Sprinkle was targeted alongside artists Andres Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, and various gay and lesbian presses. The AFA quoted the erroneous Rohrabacher “Dear Colleagues” letter, and expanded on it warning their constituents that Sprinkle, “Invoked the spirits of ancient, sacred temple prostitutes. ‘I like to evoke spirits,’ she told the crowd. ‘They love having sex’” (Bolton 150-51). The use of these particular Sprinkle quotes feels closely connected to the nineteenth century Spiritualist performances, and as an organization aligned with the Christian-right, the AFA’s invocation of a pagan-coded spirituality would have been deliberately deployed to agitate their constituents, immediately positioning Sprinkle as both harlot, and blasphemer.

Given the fact that the NEA had in fact not funded Sprinkle’s show, this was much ado about nothing (and in fact an act of congressional theatre designed to rally the house against arts funding). Pat Williams, Democratic member of the House of Representatives and leader in the House of those who supported the NEA, followed Rohrabacher’s “Dear Colleague” letter with his own on February 12, 1990. This letter can be read as an instance of a debunker debunking, and is reminiscent of the back-and-forth between scientist debunkers and Spiritualist defenders published across various periodicals and books. Williams’ letter begins, “Dear Colleague: Recently, you received what may be the Congresses’ first X-rated ‘Dear Colleague’ letter. The letter depicted in graphic detail a pornographic performance in New York City, which was supposedly funded by the taxpayers through the National Endowment for the Arts. *Titillating*,

perhaps, but not true” (my emphasis). Williams continues, “The truth is, that performance didn’t receive one penny of funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, nor for that matter, from the New York Council for the Arts.” Williams sticks the landing with the scathing, “In fact, the first time a penny of taxpayers’ money was spent on Annie Sprinkle’s performance was upon the publication of the Dear Colleague letter detailing her X-rated antics.” With that, Williams went on to make his own dramatic reveal of what Rohrabacher had been concealing: “Mr. John Frohnmayr, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, has repeatedly stated that the facts were made known before the circulation of the Dear Colleague letter” (Bolton 148-49). Williams thus, through a dramatic turn of his own, reveals the theatrics of Rohrabacher’s letter.

The NEA itself would weigh in, with a fact sheet debunking the American Family Association Fundraising Advertisement’s claims line-by-line. Of Sprinkle, they wrote “Neither the Arts Endowment nor the New York State Council on the Arts supported the Annie Sprinkle presentation” (Bolton 153). Indeed, the New York state arts council somewhat cattily denied the artistic merit of the show saying in a statement, “The council purposefully did not fund the full series [of shows at The Kitchen] because it believed that the Annie Sprinkle presentation was not of an artistic quality to warrant council support” (Stewart). This points to the fact that Sprinkle’s work was (and is still) only taken seriously within very particular circles. It does not seem like a coincidence that pornography and performance art are spaces that are both ill respected (or misunderstood), and full of women. For Sprinkle, the transition to performance art would have definitely been a step down in terms of income.¹⁸⁰ And yet, she broke into the niche circles of a niche medium, being baptized as an artist by Linda Montano in the mid

1980s.¹⁸¹ Perhaps then, part of Sprinkle's magic was to transform her "post-porn" self into a respected performance artist.

Conclusion

Women are used to concealing secrets in our bodies: pain, pregnancy, paternity. Some consider the vagina a metaphor for this: a sacred feminine space of hiding and protecting. It is also simultaneously wet, uncontained, messy, dangerous, and magic. The artists I have discussed in this chapter use their vaginal space and the acts of concealment/revelment in their performances to invoke all of these meanings. In this chapter I have also analyzed various permutations of "holes": gaps in research, gaps in knowledge and understanding, gaps in respect. The hole has a call to action in it; the inherent logic of the hole is to put something in it. My approach in this chapter has been to insert that which the Western scientific perspective leaves out – the spiritual, and indeed, magic. By analyzing Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* and Annie Sprinkle's *Post-Porn Modernist*, I have attempted to fill the holes in the research by considering those very elements. Reinterpreting Kathleen Goligher's explicit body performances has allowed me to consider them alongside performance art, and in turn, extend my definition of debunker discourse to consider the debunker-as-critic. As with the scientist/Spiritualist divide I describe in my analysis of debunker discourse, when someone makes it their project to delegitimize a performance with the goal of stopping it, they are revealing something about themselves: paternalism, arrogance, a desire to dominate. The knowledge production of artists is vastly different from that of scientists; their work does not aim to tell you what to think, leaving space for ambiguity and multiple

interpretations. When the aim of magic is not to “trick” or deceive, but to access something beyond comprehension, artists may in fact be the ones best situated to perform it. What better way to approach the unknown (or unknowable), than through art?

In Praise of the Borderlands

To exist, happily, in the Borderlands is to embrace the not knowing in life (the starting point of curiosity and any research project). This requires the setting aside of ego and arrogance and the acceptance of multiplicities: multiple forms of knowledge production, multiple (and often differing) interpretations of that knowledge, and the multiple ways in which people carve meaning and understanding out of life. While Spiritualism/spirituality are certainly at home in the Borderlands, it is not a space that is incompatible with science. On the contrary, the questioning/blurring of categories where two things meet can be a deeply generative space for intellectual inquiry of all kinds. At their best, the Borderlands can be a playful and humorous space. Humour is an inoculation against self-seriousness, a democratizing act in which even the expert can perform humility.

So, what can the Borderlands teach us? For one, there is a queer potentiality to be found there that complicates – if not does away with – binary thinking. They are a fluid space where that which defies characterization or does not fit neatly anywhere else can find a home. Footnotes, works-in-progress, cross-disciplinary research, rites of passage, hallways, equinoxes, fog over water, buds of a flower, non-binary gender, midnight, dusk, compromise, peri-menopause, musical semitones, intermissions, roadside ditches, feral cats, graduation and abandoned houses all variously find space here. The Borderlands are physical, spatial, temporal, embodied – and thus widely applicable. The uncertainty of the Borderlands is their strength; their in-between-ness a powerful site for reflection and interpretation, situated, as they are, where two things meet.

To return to my initial question: what can we learn from taking seriously that which lies between and beyond? For one, it would be a powerful antidote to the debunker discourse, which I have described herein. One can call something ridiculous, or fake, or imply that it is beneath their intelligence, but to do so is also to fundamentally miss the point. No amount of rigorous research and empirical evidence can get you closer to the affective reality of “I want to believe” nor take away the real-life reasons for “I need to believe.” Can both exist in the Borderlands? The Borderlands, in being inherently betwixt, can also function as a meeting point – connecting, joining, traversing, bridging, and linking. Perhaps, therein lies their magic.

Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed to analyze Spiritualist and scientist performances – in particular, the dynamics that emerged during confrontations between Spiritualists, scientists, and debunkers. The questions I have asked include: how does the ancient association of women with markers of theatricality (such as mimicry, artifice, and deceit) contribute to the ongoing belief that women are dissemblers? And how did this suggestion of fakery affect female Mediums who were subject to scientist debunker attacks? Furthermore, how and why are men, on the other hand, generally understood to be impartial, dispassionate, and objective, and how does this fit in with scientific epistemologies and public performances of scientific masculinity?

In response to these questions, I have interrogated a number of things: the paradoxical cultural formulations of women as both apparently deceptive *and* in possession of a specialized access to intuition (both rooted in an essentialism that conflates sex and gender). Into this paradox I inserted a consideration of trans embodiment in order to both speak back to that essentialism and demonstrate that non-normative bodies are similarly subject to antitheatrical discourse and attacks. To understand the conflation of scientific knowledge production and masculinity I looked to the latter half of the nineteenth century and the formulation of the “man of science,” and was able to locate much theatricality on the part of these supposedly objective beings. This is particularly evident in debunker discourse and the various ways in which debunkers perform their moral, intellectual, class, race, and gender “superiority.”

The case of Kathleen Goligher, the young Spiritualist Medium from Belfast who captivated audiences with her séance performances in the early twentieth century,

afforded me a specific example through which to analyze the embodied elements of Spiritualist performances. Goligher's (and/or the spirits') use of her vagina as portal to and from the spirit world opens up – so to speak – a rich site of analysis laden with signifiers of sexuality, maternity, and indeed, deception. It also allowed me to hold up a speculum/mirror in order to get a good look inside debunker strategy, motivation, and the ways in which patriarchy contributes to a wilful ignorance of female/AFAB sexuality. Putting Goligher's performances in dialogue with feminist performance artists who use their bodies to highlight and critique such systems of power allowed me to locate a type of agency in specific Spiritualist performances, as well as reframe them through the lens of art. Against this backdrop, problematic attempts to control the work of such artists through regulation and defunding can be understood through the lens of debunker discourse. Finally, I have charted a counter-discourse to debunker narratives by wherein I posit that perhaps art is the domain best suited to attempts to understand, or grapple with the unknown.

The implications of this research are especially relevant in our contemporary era. Somewhat ironically, in what seems like a return to the nineteenth century dynamics in which the Scientific Naturalists emerged onto the scene, problems of science communication in Euro-American contexts now centre on attempts to broach the widening divide between those who do and do not trust science itself. Some of the problematic power dynamics and rhetorical strategies of science that I have charted in this dissertation have no doubt fed this disbelief, along with a worldwide shift towards far-right politics and ideologies (in which the patriarchal and essentialist conceptions of sex and gender that I critique are widely accepted under the guise of “embracing

traditional gender roles”). Science communicators tackling such issues as climate change or transgender medicine would do well to consider their roles through the lens of performance, as well as the specific social locations of both themselves and their audiences.

Interestingly, current larger cultural trends in North America point to a reversed gendering of the binaries that I discuss in this dissertation as they relate to scientific knowledge and its signifiers. Those who “believe” in science, or act according to scientific knowledge are cast as feminine and/or inauthentic, while distrust in science is considered masculine, authentic, and closer to (an uncomplicated concept of) nature. For example, wearing masks in the wake of (and even during) the COVID-19 pandemic has been conflated with femininity insofar as it is a marker of a fearful (read: “pussy”) position versus a rugged individualism. Similarly, following the advice of healthcare professionals on issues such as childhood vaccination is framed in some circles as naïveté, or an inability to be a “free thinker.” On the other hand, individuals linked to an anti-science perspective, such as RFK Jr., perform a type of hypermasculinity (see: the spectacle of shirtless jeans-clad elderly man working out [Fig. 49], ivermectin – a *livestock* medicine – touted as protection against COVID, and the bravado of claiming to take a stand against institutionalized medicine – not to mention the bear fiasco¹⁸²). The arguments I make in this dissertation register somewhat differently in what some call a “post-truth” world. Are anti-vaxxers who distrust science but who trust the intuition of their bodies in fact new types of performance artists? And how should we distinguish between “woo woo” that is feminist and opens up non-normative ways of knowing, and



Fig. 49. Screenshot from a video of RFK Jr. working out posted to X in December 2024. Adapted from [<https://x.com/RobertKennedyJr>] under the fair dealing exception for research purposes, as outlined in the Canadian Copyright Act.

the anti-scientific conspiracy theories championed by those like RFK Jr. (which, it should be noted, are not mutually exclusive of feminists)?

The recent turn towards right-leaning politics has also resulted in a doubling-down on the attempts to regulate and surveil women’s and AFAB bodies. This is an escalation of the paternalistic desire to control that is based upon ideas that women and people assigned female at birth lie, and therefore cannot be trusted to make decisions on behalf of their own bodies (which, following this logic, are themselves liable to dissemble). An extreme example of this was the shocking 2022 overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court in the United States – a patriarchal interjection of law on behalf of a presumed defenceless other (as fetuses, and indeed, even blastocysts are configured in this rhetoric). What is in fact being “protected” by these performative acts

are the patriarchal norms – inscribed here as *law* – that govern what “appropriate” functions of gendered bodies are. This is reinforced in the hypermasculine performances of “pro life” men who assert protectionist and decision-making positions, and the accordant hyperfeminine performances of “pro life” women who attempt to appeal to the (flattened, uncomplicated) emotional stakes and defer to/support male “expertise.” Amidst all of this turmoil it is worth considering the lessons of the past, especially when trying to ascertain how to push back against challenges to our rights and freedoms with those seemingly determined to return us to what many would consider a more retrograde time.

As I noted in my Chapter 1 discussion of the “lying” trans body, the threat of the abject, feminized other is also extended to trans bodies (which, as it should be noted, are not exempt from the above limitations on reproductive freedoms) – something that is very much present in the contemporary North American political moment. Conservatives in Canada and the United States are attempting to not only regulate trans bodies by limiting access to various facets of gender affirming care, but also outright erase, or deny their existence.¹⁸³ Here, certain attacks have taken on the tone of performance art spectacle. Such is the case with American right-wing influencer Candace Owens’ accusations that Brigitte Macron, wife of French President Emmanuel Macron, was assigned male at birth. The public feud – currently being enacted across social media and lawsuits – involves many of the dynamics I have discussed in this dissertation: allegations of fraud related to embodiment, recourse to scientific proof, and a belief in the indexical value of the photographic image as truthful representation. In September 2025 the BBC reported that, “Macron and his wife, Brigitte, are planning to present

photographic and scientific evidence to a US court to prove Mrs. Macron is a [cisgender] woman” as a part of the defamation lawsuit they have taken against Owens (Mutanda-Dougherty et al.).

There is, of course, much more that can – and should – be said about this, and the various ways that topics I have introduced in this dissertation could be applied to contemporary political performances offer promising avenues for future research. Beyond the threat of introducing scope creep, the limitations of this study are primarily related to constraints of money and time. Had this not been the case, I would have loved to take research trips to sites that are important to my project. Chief amongst these is the Cambridge University Library, which since 1989 has held the archive and rare books of the Society for Psychical Research. The collection includes a number of objects, photographs, and documents related to the Kathleen Goligher case, and it would have been a privilege to pore over them in-person. While an amazing feat of modern technology, my use of primarily digital archives and research tools precluded me from the magic of stumbling across something special in the archives. I also would have loved to travel to Northern Ireland, to get an embodied sense of what Belfast is like, and visit some of the landmarks that are important to my study – including the places where Kathleen Goligher lived and performed her séances. A research trip to the UK could have also included visits to sites such as the Royal Institution in London, a space occupied by many great men of science, including Tyndall who held a position there as a lecturer and professor of natural philosophy.¹⁸⁴

Beyond the desire to chase my research across the globe, the need to narrow the scope and focus of my project meant that there were many interesting artists and figures I

could not include. It is here that opportunities for future research could extend my work by applying it to other Spiritualists who performed birth-like feats during their séances. These include French Medium Eva Carrière, known as Eva C (1886-1969), Scottish Medium Helen Duncan¹⁸⁵ (1897-1956), and American Medium Mina “Margery” Crandon (1881-1941). It would also be fascinating to theorize the erotics of anal ectoplasmic performances, especially insofar as it involved male Mediums.¹⁸⁶

There is also an opportunity to expand my work on vaginal performance art and its connection to spirituality. In particular, picking up on a thread from Chapter 1, I would like the opportunity to extend these ideas to contemporary performance artists, especially trans artists. Though I have been unable to find any trans performance artists directly taking up Spiritualism in their work (yet), there are many artists whose work addresses some of the central issues I raise in the dissertation. For example, interdisciplinary artist Zackary Drucker’s 2015 video piece *Southern for Pussy* is a funny and poignant examination of mother-daughter relationships (Drucker performs alongside her real-life mother Penny Sori), vaginal knowledge, and cultural constructions of womanhood – and pussies. Likewise, interdisciplinary audio, performance, and installation artist Lou Sheppard has multiple pieces that could be analyzed through the theory of the Borderlands. These include, for example, *Crepuscular Rhythms* (2019-), “a performance score that figures dawn and dusk as queer times of day...[which] provide protective cover for queer and trans bodies in public space,” performed as a series of walks wearing light sensitive shirts. They also include *Rights of Passage* (2022), a drag opera following three performers, “along the riparian zone, an amphibious threshold between water and

land that runs along a river's edge... enact[ing] a right of passage" ("Crepuscular Rhythms" and "Rights of Passage").

Other contemporary performance artists' work is a reminder that gender identity and performance are complex, and some trans artists appear to sit more comfortably within binary gender roles, reinscribing cultural narratives of femininity or masculinity. For example, transmasculine performance artist Cassils recalls the hypermasculinity of earlier cisgendered male performance art stars. In their durational performance *Becoming an Image* (2012-) Cassils – as they describe on their website – “unleash an attack on a 2,000 pound clay block in total darkness” (“Becoming an Image”). Images featured on his website also include him beating the shit out of aforementioned block of clay (hands wrapped like a boxer); staring defiantly into the camera surrounded by flames “engaged in a treacherous fire stunt” while wearing a fire-proof suit for their piece *Inextinguishable Fire*; and flexing seemingly every muscle in their body as they hold a fighter's pose.

My desire to expand on the ideas I have presented in this dissertation also extend to examples of debunker discourse that go beyond scientist/Spiritualist confrontations. There is a wealth of debunker sources that could be analyzed through the lens of performance. For example, The Committee for the Skeptical Inquiry (CSI) (formerly, The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal [CSICOP]) is “an independent non-profit organization that evaluates paranormal and fringe-science claims from a scientific viewpoint and attempts to provide the public and scholars with scientifically reliable information.” CSI's list of prominent fellows includes figures I have discussed in this dissertation such as Carl Sagan (a founding member) and Richard Dawkins (“History of CSICOP”). CSI and CSICOP (whose inclusion of “cop” in its

acronym is begging for a close reading) publishes the international journal *Skeptical Inquirer: The Magazine for Science and Reason*, which has a backlog of forty-nine years worth of bi-monthly issues – an enormous archive to draw on. Another rich text that I would like to use my framework of debunker discourse to analyze is *The Debunking Handbook*. Originally authored in 2011 by cognitive scientists Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook (who has done extensive work on communication surrounding climate change) the handbook aims to provide practical advice to would-be debunkers on how to counter misinformation. The *Handbook* has since been updated with the input of twenty-two researchers, and is available for free download from the Centre for Climate Change Communication in twenty-one different languages as *The Debunking Handbook 2020*.

As the curtains draw on this dissertation's own particular performance of knowledge production and expertise, signalling the end of the show (though as Performance Studies scholars we know the show never *really* ends...) I would like to propose one final thought: the unification of debunking and art in a sub category of popular science writing that I am calling *debunker poetics*. As exemplified in some of his writing that I have quoted earlier in the dissertation, Tyndall was very much a poet. In fact, Scientific Naturalists were perhaps ideally suited to this task: they expressed a passion to convey the majesty of the natural world that often veered into the artistic, perhaps especially because of the void of meaning left in the wake of the loss of institutionalized religion. If God is dead, then what comes next? Perhaps art. The spiritual can be found in art, or nature, or beautiful equations, or in maintaining a dialogue with those you have lost. Cast amidst this well of personal meaning, there is something unseemly, and certainly ungenerous, about attempting to discredit someone else's belief

system to the point of denying its reality. Such displays of moral superiority and power do not get the debunker any closer to understanding what happens after death. To some this is, understandably, intolerable. However, if one can release the domineering need to police spiritual and epistemological boundaries, the Borderlands can be a complex, beautiful, and generative place to be.

Notes

¹ In 2019 historian of science Richard Noakes published *Physics and Psychics: The Occult and the Sciences in Modern Britain*, a thorough study of the connections between Victorian science and various occult phenomena. Many scientists of this era also held a fervent belief in Spiritualism and dedicated research to proving its veracity.

² Scholars who have written about science and performance include: Sue-Ellen Case, Iwan Rhys Morus, Kristen Shepherd-Barr, Tamsen Wolff, and Tiffany Watt-Smith.

³ For an extensive history of the Fox sisters and the birth of American Spiritualism, see: Barbara Weisberg's *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (2005), and Maurice Leonard's *People from the Other Side: A History of Spiritualism* (2008).

⁴ Spiritualism is a still-practiced religion, albeit in much lower numbers than during its heyday in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though not always practiced within the confines of religious institutions, Spiritualist Churches have and continue to exist in many places (including Toronto).

⁵ See also: Barrow, Cox, Goldsmith, Oppenheim, Natale, Winter, and Weisberg.

⁶ For more on this see: Evelleen Richard's "Darwin and the Descent of Woman" (1983), Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1983), Evelyn Fox Keller's *Reflections on Gender and Science* (1985), Cynthia Eagle Russett's *Sexual Science: The Construction of Victorian Womanhood* (1989), Londa L. Schiebinger's *The Mind Has No Sex?: Women and the Origins of Modern Science* (1989) and *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (1993), Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (1999), John F. Kasson's *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (2001), Deborah Rudacille's *The Riddle of Gender: Science, Activism, and Transgender Rights* (2005), Ann B. Shteir and Bernard V. Lightman's anthology *Figuring it Out: Science, Gender, and Visual Culture* (2006), Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), Cordelia Fine's *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference* (2010) and *Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science, and Society* (2017), Alice Domurat Dreger's *Galileo's Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and the Search for Justice in Science* (2015), Mari Ruti's *The Age of Scientific Sexism: How Evolutionary Psychology Promotes Gender Profiling and Fans the Battle of the Sexes* (2015), Margot Lee Shetterly's *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race* (2016), Kate Moore's *The Radium Girls: The Dark Story of America's Shining Women* (2016), Abby Norman's *Ask Me About My Uterus: A Quest to Make Doctors Believe in Women's Pain* (2018).

⁷ Of Crawford's publishers Roach writes, "Such was the gullibility of the day that Dutton published five of Crawford's books without a modicum of queasiness" (128). Roach also confidently claims (while repeating many un-fact checked claims, including erroneous reports of how Crawford died) that, "Kathleen Goligher relied on Crawford's credulity to make a name for herself and her fabric-store emanations" (134) – a reference to the hypothesis that ectoplasm was nothing more than muslin.

⁸ Elsewhere Fisher has continued her research at the intersection of Mediums/art with the article "Locked Grooves, a Circle of Hands. Paranormal Affects in Georgina Starr's *I am the Medium*" (2023).

⁹ For more on this see the 2018 issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, "Trans, Time, and History" edited by Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici.

¹⁰ In the case of the pussy-performatives I discuss in this dissertation, and following Elizabeth Freeman's notion of erotohistoriographic research, perhaps we can think of this as scissoring through time and space (yes, it is real).

¹¹ I am indebted to committee member Dr. Marlis Schweitzer for the brilliant idea to situate these ideas in the Borderlands of the dissertation, a form that beautifully reflects the content.

¹² Capitalizing the term "Borderlands" is my own distinction – Anzaldúa uses a lowercase "b" in her book. The word is also capitalized in the Spiritualist periodical *Borderland: A Quarterly Review and Index of Psychic Phenomena (1893-97)*.

¹³ My use of the term "homeplace" here is meant to recall the concept developed by bell hooks, where in a hostile world (as is the case for the deep racial divides between Black and white America that hooks writes about) home can act as a site of resistance and vital place for meaningful cultural-specific regeneration. See hooks, "Homeplace as a Site of Resistance" in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990).

¹⁴ I contend that my dissertation resists the "liminal norm." Though I am interested in the Borderlands as a theoretical device, I make no claims to efficacy. Rather, I offer a different take on liminality: rethinking the liminal as it applies to women/AFAB, and especially, maternal corporeality.

¹⁵ In *Time Binds* Elizabeth Freeman writes about the "self-conscious theatricality of queer cultural texts" (730).

¹⁶ One of my favourite elements of the use of such "silly archives" is the peek behind the curtain they provide into the private lives of other scholars: What TV shows do they watch? Did they come up with that concept while watching that movie with their kid? etc.

¹⁷ In many cases, as I will show throughout the dissertation, this was a false binary. Many practitioners of both Spiritualism and science sought to reconcile the two through experimentation.

¹⁸ In fact, this extends beyond merely the popular imagination, to the expert one. Performance Studies scholar Richard Schechner famously differentiated between performances that are effective and those that are *merely* entertaining.

¹⁹ For more on this see: Kyla Schuller's *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (2018), and Harald Fischer-Tiné (ed.) *Anxieties, Fear and Panic in Colonial Settings: Empires on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (2016).

²⁰ For more on this see: Case, Sue-Ellen. "Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1985, pp. 317–27. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3206851>.

²¹ Anne Helen Peterson discusses the cultural construction of women as being "too much" in her 2017 book, *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman*. See also, Lena Dunham's 2015 television show *Too Much*, a romantic comedy in which both parts of the heterosexual protagonist couple are prone to being "over the top."

²² Though examples abound I am thinking here of the incomparable Patti Lupone, and in particular her performances of self glimpsed in interviews such as this one with *The New York Times* titled, "Patti Lupone on getting bullied by Broadway, and why she keeps coming back," <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/21/magazine/patti-lupone-broadway-company.html>.

²³ Because of the rise-and-fall arc of these internet celebrities has such a quick turnover in the internet age any example I provide will be inherently dated, however the 2015 *New York Magazine* story "10 Former Viral Sensations on Life After Internet Fame" by Clint Rainey provides a few examples that may be memorable to those who were extremely "online" in the past two decades (<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2015/12/10-viral-sensations-on-life-after-internet-fame.html>).

²⁴ See Jonathan Jones' 2014 article in *The Guardian*, "The artist who lays eggs with her vagina – or why performance art is so silly," where he writes, "Performance art is a joke. Taken terribly seriously by the art world, it is a litmus test of pretension and intellectual dishonesty. If you are wowed by it, you are either susceptible to pseudo-intellectual guff, or lying" (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/apr/22/artist-eggs-vagina-paintings-performance-art-milo-moire>).

²⁵ Sometimes this goes beyond mere pejorative to coordinated attack. In his book *Perform or Else* Jon McKenzie refers to performance art as being “under siege” in relation to the NEA Four case, which I expand upon in Chapter 4 (9).

²⁶ See, for example, Laura Levin’s essay on populist Toronto mayor Rob Ford, “On Political Performance Art and Rob Fordian Performatives” in *Performance Studies in Canada* (2017).

²⁷ Bottoms identifies Donald Kaplan as another person who contributed to the homophobic conversations surrounding theatre in the 1960s (178). Before that, as Amelia Jones has also argued, Michael Fried’s 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood” bemoaned the theatricality (read: effeminacy) of post-modernist art.

²⁸ Austen did not consider theatrical dialogue to be performative speech because of its pre-scripted nature.

²⁹ Scholars who have extended Bottom’s critique in a feminist direction include Shannon Jackson and Laura Levin. In her 2004 book *Professing Performance* Jackson writes about how Schechner’s framing of performance, “has the familiar effect of excluding women and other maternal figures from such forms of mastery. The argument positions the female as an environment, as the place in which ritual occurs, rather than as a ritual subject herself” (169). In Levin’s 2014 book *Performing Ground*, she links Bottoms’ critique to the ways, “Dismissals of feminized, queer, proscenium space have accompanied masculinist celebrations of environmental theatre” (76).

³⁰ I am thinking here of Acconci’s notorious (and creepy) 1972 performances *Seedbed* at the Sonnabend Gallery in SoHo, wherein visitors entered the gallery to find, apparently, nothing more than a wooden ramp. Acconci lay under the ramp listening to the people above and masturbating based on his fantasies of their bodies moving above his, which he narrated and amplified into the gallery space through speakers. In Barry Le Va’s 1970 *Velocity Piece No. 2* he ran back and forth between two walls at Los Angeles’ La Jolla Museum, violently hurling his body into the walls until he could no longer continue and the walls were splattered with his blood. In 1971 Chris Burden arranged to have himself non-lethally shot at point-blank range for his appropriately titled work *Shoot*. And the Viennese Actionists, which included artists Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolph Schwarzkogler, created performance works in the 1960s and 70s that can be regarded as crossing the line into acts that went “too far.” Such actions include Nitsch’s *Orgies Mysteries Theatre (OM Theatre)*, multi-day festival style rituals of sex and gore that first took place in the 1960s and have continued to the present day. Activities include ritual disembowelments of animals, and the use of blood and flesh as materials.

³¹ The only other reference to Spiritualism and Tyndall that I have found is an 1869 letter to the London Dialectical Society, reprinted in their 1971 “Report on Spiritualism.” In the letter Tyndall notes his earlier invitation to observe a séance at the house of a Mr.

Wallace (the same séance he would write about in the essay “Science and Spirits”), and concludes, “I am now perfectly willing to accept the personal invitation of Mr. Crookes, should he consider that he can show me phenomena of the character you describe” (“London Dialectical Society” 265).

³² For more on Ziegfeld girls see Linda Mizejewski’s 1999 book *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema*.

³³ Despite marriage being central to the plot of the film that would cement Valentino’s status as silent-film sex symbol, *The Sheik* was only released in 1921. However, the novel upon which it was based, by E.M. Hull was published in 1919.

³⁴ I return to a discussion of Orientalism in Chapter 4 as it relates to feminist spirituality.

³⁵ For more on this see Nancy Ordovery’s *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (2003).

³⁶ For more on this see Karen Stote’s *An Act of Genocide: Colonialism and the Sterilization of Aboriginal Women* (2015).

³⁷ A personal anecdote that illuminates the racial and class double standards at work in instances like these: my mom tells a story about asking her OB-GYN for a tubal ligation during her time in hospital when my brother was born in Canada in 1989. The doctor refused, citing the (relatively low) chance of infant mortality, and that if this were the case she might regret the procedure.

³⁸ Rabelais employs the common contradiction of gendering “Nature” female and offering “her” reverence and fear in the midst of a misogynist tirade.

³⁹ Diamond brilliantly points out that he is a pseudo-Glaucon because he is created by Plato to serve in this metaphor, and therefore *is a representation*.

⁴⁰ There is a pervasive identification of the female with the maternal. As expressed earlier, I do not wish to make any arguments rooted in essentialism, and the notion that the mother is the paradigm of womanhood is deeply essentialist. This line of thinking is what leads to the erroneous assumption that all women will be mothers and all mothers are women. My section here on the maternal body deals with the corporeal experiences of women who gestate and birth children, however this is certainly not the only (or a superior) way to mother. Following Adrienne Rich’s articulation of the patriarchal institution of motherhood, I too differentiate between the problematic ideology of *motherhood* and the act of *mothering*. For more on this, see Rich’s *Of Woman Born*).

⁴¹ For more on this see: the 2023 report by the Center for American Progress, “A Year After the Supreme Court Overturned *Roe v. Wade*, Trends in State Abortion Laws Have

Emerged,” a 2023 article by the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children’s Health, “One year later: Reflections following the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*,” and the 2022 editorial in the journal *Reproductive Health*, “Repercussions of overturning *Roe v. Wade* for women across systems and beyond borders.”

⁴² For more on this see Helen King’s *Midwifery, Obstetrics and the Rise of Gynaecology: The Uses of a Sixteenth-Century Compendium* (2007).

⁴³ Ironically, in 2008 the mainstream media coverage of trans “Pregnant Man” Thomas Beatie took on the tone of sideshow *hysteria*.

⁴⁴ I am citing here an anti-trans argument that being trans is a choice one makes. I do not believe that trans folks *choose* to be trans.

⁴⁵ In a September 2025 performance at the Toronto *Just for Laughs* festival trans comedians Ava Val and Patti Harrison joked about this – and complicated it further – by speaking about feeling validated in their ability to pass in instances where they were subject to misogyny.

⁴⁶ See the Vox article, “Anti-transgender bathroom hysteria, explained” (<https://www.vox.com/2016/5/5/11592908/transgender-bathroom-laws-rights>) as well as the non-profit think tank Movement Advancement Project’s (MAP) equality map “Bans on Transgender People Using Public Bathrooms and Facilities According to their Gender Identity” which tracks anti-trans law across various US states (https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/nondiscrimination/bathroom_bans).

⁴⁷ Noted transphobe J.K. Rowling seemingly invokes this when she uses her own history of sexual violence to justify her anti-trans arguments.

⁴⁸ See the 7 February 2025 *New York Magazine* article, “Good-bye, Pamela Paul: The contrarian columnist showed us the intolerable side of liberalism” by Andrea Long Chu.

⁴⁹ I propose an anti-essentialist theory of women’s intuition, which is that what may appear as an innate gendered difference is in fact a response to the realities of living under patriarchy. I argue that what can be interpreted as intuition is actually a learned awareness or attunement, based on real or perceived environmental and social threats. This would mean that women and girls develop a heightened extra-sensory awareness out of necessity and survival. An example of this that will be familiar to many women is the embodied awareness that someone is following you as you walk down a dark street alone. The reality that women are often not safe at night or in the company of strangers is something that is logged in the body and therefore becomes embodied knowledge.

Beyond the need for safety, women are socialized from a young age to be great readers of situations and emotional dynamics – another thing that could be perceived as intuition. Women are taught to feel responsible for and be caretakers of the emotions of

those around them. This means carefully monitoring the affect of those in their orbit and responding or performing accordingly to variously make themselves smaller, steer conversations or situations away from anything unpleasant, or protect the feelings of those around them, to name but a few examples. This complex ability to read situations is not unlike the practice of cold reading undertaken by psychics and mediums – quickly, and often accurately, sizing up who or what is in front of them to make generalizations about the person or situation. Beyond women, members of virtually every other oppressed group practice this tactic (including men, which strengthens the argument against essentialist understandings of intuition). For example, queers, racialized, or lower classed folks become adept at reading social situations and acting accordingly by code-switching or avoiding certain spaces, people, and scenarios (For more on this see: *Code-Switching in Conversation: Language, interaction and identity* (1998) ed. Peter Auer, “Cultural Code-Switching: Straddling the Achievement Gap” (2013) by Jennifer M. Morton, and “Social Dimensions of Culture, Code-Switching, and Controlled Vocabularies” (2024) by Heather Moulaison et. al.). This is less a function of an inherently inferior position than an adapted response to being treated as if one is inferior. Social scientists refer to this as “subordinate’s intuition.”

⁵⁰ Gigerenzer identifies three different version of the idea: a polarized understanding of male rationality vs. female intuition that originated with Aristotle and extended through to the nineteenth century; a version influenced by Darwinian theory put forth by Francis Galton that posited a “natural ability” that men simply had more of than women; and a third version promoted by Havelock Ellis which argued a higher variability in men’s intelligence (in other words, more men of lower intelligence, but also more male “geniuses”).

⁵¹ For more on these competing and contradictory demands see Paula Caplan’s “Don’t Trust Mother: Then and Now” in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, edited by Andrea O’Reilly.

⁵² Fisher continues to work with ideas related to intuition and divining. In 2025 she and her curatorial partner Jim Drobnick (who work under the curatorial entity “DisplayCult”) exhibited the project “Portraits as Portals: Psychic Mediums Read Unknown Artists” at Art Windsor Essex. For the project Fisher and Drobnick had Mediums from Windsor and Detroit look at unattributed portraits from the museum’s collection in order to “[test] the use of paranormal perception as a method for art historical research” and to “reveal feelings about the artists’ emotional states and motivations, the mood of the era, and the atmosphere of the setting’s context” (<https://artwindsorwessex.ca/exhibitions/portraits-as-portals/>).

⁵³ For more on this see: the 2022 Washington Post article, “Five years on, what happened to the men of #MeToo?” as well as the 2024 Harvard International Review article, “The #MeToo Movement: Investigating the Lasting International Impacts.”

⁵⁴ For more on this see the 2022 article, “Viral paradox: The intersection of “me too” and #MeToo” by Alicia Boyd and Bree McEwan.

⁵⁵ Scholars like Londa Schiebinger and Carolyn Merchant place the masculinization of science earlier than the nineteenth century, arguing that it goes back at least to the scientific revolution in the early modern period.

⁵⁶ Any concept of the division between the sexes is binary, and therefore inherently flawed, as it does not account for the fluidity of gender, gender-variant, gender-queer, and gender non-conforming individuals. Though the terms “woman”, “female”, “man”, and “male” are used throughout this paper, they should be taken in every case to refer to the gender-identification of an individual, and not an endorsement of essentialist views of sex.

⁵⁷ See: Morus, Iwan Rhys. “Worlds of wonder: Sensation and the Victorian scientific performance.” *Isis; an international review devoted to the history of science and its cultural influences* vol. 101,4 (2010): 806-16.

⁵⁸ William Paley was a Natural Theologist, famous for his “watchmaker” analogy, which sought to demonstrate the divine design of the universe by likening the complex organ of the eye to the pocket watch. For more on this see Paley’s *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802).

⁵⁹ At the beginning of the nineteenth century Oxford and Cambridge were Anglican institutions that educated clergy and maintained the principles of the Church of England. In 1871 the Universities Tests Act removed religious requirements for staff and students from post-secondary institutions and forced universities to accept non-Anglicans (but not women – Oxford would start accepting women to degree programs in 1920, and Cambridge lagged even further behind, waiting until 1948). This is always relevant when thinking about the authority that education, particularly from prestigious institutions, grants. It is also a meta narrative in any doctoral dissertation by a woman.

⁶⁰ For a detailed discussion of the ways in which the agnosticism of Scientific Naturalists (such as Huxley) incorporated religious thought, and indeed, “deep religious sensibility” see Chapter 5, “Religion, Theology, and the Church Agnostic” in Bernard V. Lightman’s *Origins of Agnosticism* (120).

⁶¹ One such “boys club” was The X Club, a Victorian dining club made up of Scientific Naturalists, “remarkable for the power that its nine members exerted on the scientific and cultural climate of late-19th-century England” (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/X-Club>). For more on this see Ruth Barton’s *The X Club: Power and Authority in Victorian Science* (2018).

⁶² This cannot be separated from race. In *Sexual Science* Russett notes, “Of all the permutations of physical differentiation sex is, together with colour, the most evident. Race and gender, not infrequently linked, are two of the great themes of nineteenth-century science” (7).

⁶³ Though he is the thinker most commonly associated with evolutionary theory, Darwin was not the first to propose such an idea. French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck proposed a cohesive theory of inherited characteristics in his 1809 *Philosophie zoologique*, and Alfred Russel Wallace co-presented the theory of evolution by natural selection with Darwin in 1858. It was apparently Wallace’s independent work on the subject that prompted Darwin to publish *On the Origin of Species* in 1859.

⁶⁴ At Marburg Tyndall studied under Robert Bunsen, a name anyone who took high school level science will recognize as the creator of the Bunsen burner.

⁶⁵ Thomas Hardy’s controversial 1895 novel *Jude the Obscure* examines these class dynamics, telling the story of a stonemason who longs for a university education.

⁶⁶ In the wake of his infamous Belfast address Tyndall was labeled an atheist, though he never “came out”, so to speak, as atheist or agnostic. In “John Tyndall’s religion: a fragment” Geoffrey Cantor argues for a more nuanced and complicated understanding of Tyndall’s faith (or lack thereof).

⁶⁷ See the John Tyndall correspondence project: <https://tyndallproject.com/>.

⁶⁸ The role of the voyage was important for a number of male scientists, such as Huxley, Darwin, Wallace, and Hooker. Tyndall did not have a voyage so he had to use the Alps!

⁶⁹ Natural theologians, for example, attempted to reconcile Genesis with the rise of Geology and the evidence that the earth is orders of magnitude older than 6000 years old. In response to works like Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833), which laid the foundation for modern Geology, natural theologians came up with the Day-Age theory, where days were re-interpreted as epochs. For more on the Day-Age theory see Richard Fallon’s *Contesting Earth’s History in Transatlantic Literary Culture, 1860–1935: Believers and Visionaries on the Borderlines of Geology and Palaeontology*.

⁷⁰ Though, as Richard Noakes has noted, “the study of psychical phenomena occupied a much more significant place among late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century physical scientists than we have assumed and that the encounters between physical and psychical enquiries stimulated a degree of theoretical, experimental and other types of scientific activity that has been largely overlooked” (5).

⁷¹ Huxley never accepted Darwin’s theory of evolution but defended Darwin’s right to put it forward because it was a naturalistic theory.

⁷² The history of science was long dominated by an internalist approach. This historiography focused on the internal developments of science without the inclusion of social factors, and tended to prioritize and valorize specific figures (like Newton or Darwin). The philosopher Thomas S. Kuhn's 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was particularly influential for the way he proposed an alternative to the internalist model, which conceived of science as constantly progressing and building upon evolutions in thought. Kuhn, on the other hand argued that the underlying paradigms of science periodically underwent radical – revolutionary – change, such as Einstein's theory of relativity replacing Newtonian mechanics. The internalist approach was eventually replaced by a contextualist approach that examines the larger cultural context in which science was influenced by, and came to influence culture. For more on this see the 1997 anthology *Victorian Science in Context*, edited by Bernard Lightman.

⁷³ For more on this see Bernard V. Lightman's *Evolutionary Naturalism in Victorian Britain: The 'Darwinians' and Their Critics* (2009).

⁷⁴ Tyndall enjoyed the dual roles of namer and namee. The aforementioned Lauwinen-Thor was named by him, and as he notes in a March 1871 footnote in the second edition of *Hours of Exercise*, "The name has since been adopted in all the maps" (13). Somewhat curiously, given its location, there is a peak in California's Sierra Nevada range named Mount Tyndall in 1864 (see "Discovery of Mount Tyndall" by William H. Brewer in *The Popular Science Monthly*, vol. 2, 1873).

⁷⁵ Thanks to committee member Dr. Marlis Schweitzer for bringing this monument to my attention.

⁷⁶ Cock-rock?

⁷⁷ They were nonconformists insofar as they were educated outside of Oxbridge, though not in the strict sense, that is, non-Anglican Protestants.

⁷⁸ Elsewhere Reidy expresses extremely romantic sentiment towards Tyndall. In "The Strange Deaths, Varied Lives, and Ultimate Resurrection of Professor Tyndall" he writes, "Tyndall always loved the mountains...I think he would have loved the mountains of Montana as well; I wish he had visited the Rockies before his untimely death. As he lay in his bed in Hasslemere that cold December day, the taste of chloral hydrate sweet on his lips, I also wish I could have whispered in his ear to tell him just how exciting his long overdue resurrection would ultimately be." The long overdue resurrection Reidy is referring to is the publication of the John Tyndall Correspondence Project, which Reidy was involved with. At the very beginning of his essay he dramatically claims, "John Tyndall died two strange deaths, both at the hands of his wife Louisa. The first was accidental, quick, and relatively painless; the second was deliberate, prolonged, and far more agonizing." The deliberate death Reidy is referring to is Louisa Tyndall's posthumous control over her husband's work, and untimely publication of his *Life and*

Letters. In this formulation Reidy casts himself as saviour of a great man's legacy (<https://mtprof.msun.edu/Spr2013/tyndall.html#T4>).

⁷⁹ Thanks to committee member Dr. Marlis Schweitzer for pointing out this connection.

⁸⁰ Though what has come to be known as “first wave” feminism is generally recognized for eventually crystallizing around the fight for white women's suffrage, at its mid-nineteenth century inception the movement was more broadly aligned with other struggles of the day: abolition, children's and animal's rights, and access to education and employment. For more on this see Braude's *Radical Spirits*.

⁸¹ For a discussion of how phrenology intersected with theatre see Marlis Schweitzer's “Casting Clara Fisher: Phrenology, Protean Farce, and the ‘Astonishing’ Career of a Child Actress,” from *Theatre Journal* 68 (2016): 167-190.

⁸² Freud's understanding of homosexuality (or inversion, as he referred to it) was complex. In that same letter to the distressed mother of a homosexual he wrote, “Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness.” However, he also referenced the possibility of what we would understand as conversion therapy, writing, “In a certain number of cases we succeed in developing the blighted germs of heterosexual tendencies, which are present in every homosexual; in the majority of cases it is no more possible.”

⁸³ These particular women were not scientists, however other female mountaineers did engage in science from the mountaintop. American mountaineer Fanny Bullock Workman presented research from her trips to Himalayas to both the Royal Geographical Society and the Geographical Society of America, though both organizations refused to admit her as a member. For more on this see Dorothy Middleton's *Victorian Lady Travellers* (1965).

⁸⁴ The 2020 film *Ammonite* starring Kate Winslet as Mary was loosely based around Anning's life.

⁸⁵ Emma Darwin (née Wedgwood) was Charles Darwin's first cousin, and descended of the famous Wedgwood pottery family. The Wedgwood website lists a collection titled “Darwin: Voyage of the Beagle” where one can purchase bone china decorated with drawings made by the Darwin children illustrating their father's work, and excerpts from the original manuscript of *Origin of Species*. The price for one 11oz mug is \$109.00 CAD. ([https://www.wedgwood.com/en-ca/collections/all-collections/darwin-voyage-of-thebeagle#aq=%40categories%20%3D%3D%20\(%22darwin_voyage%22%2C%22darwin_origins%22\)&numberOfResults=19](https://www.wedgwood.com/en-ca/collections/all-collections/darwin-voyage-of-thebeagle#aq=%40categories%20%3D%3D%20(%22darwin_voyage%22%2C%22darwin_origins%22)&numberOfResults=19)). For more on Emma Darwin see: *Emma Darwin, Wife of Charles Darwin: A Century of Family Letters* (2010) edited by H.E. Litchfield, and *Emma Darwin: A Victorian Life*, (2010) by James D. Loy and Kent M. Loy.

⁸⁶ See: Kevin Young's *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News* (2017).

⁸⁷ It is interesting to consider when Klement was writing this, in the direct aftermath of World War II.

⁸⁸ An organization for scientific research and education founded in 1799. Tyndall became a Professor of Natural Philosophy (Physics) there in 1853.

⁸⁹ For more on this, (and the show's legacy and reach) see the extensive scholarship on *The X-Files*, including Regina Hansen's "Catholicism in *The X-Files*: Dana Scully and the harmony of faith and reason" (2001) and Wakefield, Sarah R. Wakefield's "'Your Sister in St. Scully': An Electronic Community of Female Fans of The X-Files" (2001).

⁹⁰ This is not a hard and fast rule, as both men have also demonstrated the ability to slip into smug skepticism in their work. In Nye's Netflix series *Bill Nye Saves the World* (2017-2018) he demonstrates a far snarkier tone than in his 90s work (perhaps because the target audience for the latter show was not children). Similarly, Sagan's 1996 book *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* veers into debunker discourse territory.

⁹¹ For more on this see: Howard, Jill. "'Physics and Fashion': John Tyndall and His Audiences in Mid-Victorian Britain." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, vol. 35, no. 4, Dec. 2004, pp. 729–758.

⁹² Published by Longmans, Green, and Co. in London and D. Appleton and Company in New York, *Fragments* was widely read and already in its fourth edition by 1873 (a mere two years after its first publication).

⁹³ In Richard Noakes' 2019 book *Physics and Psychics: The Occult and Sciences in Modern Britain* he details the interest of many Victorian scientists in researching psychic phenomena.

⁹⁴ Tyndall's agnostic perspective is evident in most of his writings, where he acknowledges the limits of scientific and human knowledge and the many unresolved questions about the universe. For more on Victorian Agnosticism see Bernard Lightman's *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge* (1987).

⁹⁵ While Harvard did not have a dedicated department, they were affiliated with the American Society for Psychical Research, which was founded in 1884.

⁹⁶ The Stanford Research Institute carried out parapsychology research on areas such as telekinesis from 1972 until 1991.

⁹⁷ The Duke Parapsychology Lab was founded in 1930 by J.B. Rhine and William McDougall.

⁹⁸ These were the intellectual and spiritual precursors to the character Fox Mulder, who in the 1990s was somewhat of an anachronism, perhaps one of the last of his kind, harkening back to a time when this was considered a legitimate area of research.

⁹⁹ Ironically, since the Medium claimed to be repelled by magnets, she herself could be said to possess diamagnetic properties.

¹⁰⁰ Dawkins frequently displays first-class drama queen theatrics. For example, “To accuse science of robbing life of the warmth that makes it worth living is so preposterously mistaken, so diametrically opposite to my own feelings and those of most working scientists, I am almost driven to the despair of which I am wrongly suspected” (Dawkins x) and “Paranormalism could be called an abuse of the legitimate sense of poetic wonder which true science ought to be feeding” (Dawkins xii).

¹⁰¹ With these statements Tyndall seems to acknowledge the limits of his abilities. This is not dissimilar from those who realize that presenting “facts” and evidence to challenge conspiracy theories is a losing endeavour because those who believe the theories have their own archives of “facts” and evidence.

¹⁰² In the introduction to *A Magician Among the Spirits*, Houdini, an enthusiastic debunker of Spiritualism spoke to this legitimate concern for others that apparently motivated his debunking attempts. He writes, “As I advanced to riper years of experience I was brought to a realization of the seriousness of trifling with the hallowed reverence which the average human being bestows on the departed, and when I personally became afflicted with similar grief I was chagrined that I ever should have been guilty of such frivolity [of holding séances and performing as a medium] and for the first time realized that it bordered on crime” (Houdini xi).

¹⁰³ Magicians, including Houdini, were very invested in the debunking of “fraud” mediums. Their knowledge and expertise in sleight of hand made them ideal investigators of physical mediums. Other notable magician-debunkers include “The Amazing” James Randi, and Penn and Teller.

¹⁰⁴ Other than Kathleen the circle members included: Mr. Morrison (her brother-in-law), Mrs. Morrison (her sister), Miss Lily Goligher (her sister), Miss Anna Goligher (her sister), Mr. Goligher (her father), and Master Samuel Goligher (her brother).

¹⁰⁵ During their early work together Crawford claims not to have paid the Golighers, however he made regular payments to them from 1919 until his death in 1920, and almost certainly provided them with gifts or other material comforts (besides the attention, publicity, and importance he lavished on them) before that.

¹⁰⁶ Others scholars who have connected Spiritualism and performance include Jennifer Fisher, who in *Technologies of Intuition* (2006) writes about performance art in relation to Spiritualism, Amy Lehman, whose 2009 book *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* positions Mediums as actors, and Jennifer Higgin's *The Other Side: a story of women in art and the spirit world* (2024).

¹⁰⁷ See, for example: Mulvey, Laura. "Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious or 'You Don't Know What is Happening, Do You, Mr Jones?'" *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1989, pp. 8–18. *Language, Discourse, Society*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9_2., Hayssen, Virginia. "Misconceptions about Conception and Other Fallacies: Historical Bias in Reproductive Biology." *Integrative and Comparative Biology*, vol. 60, no. 3, Sept. 2020, pp. 683–691. Oxford University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icb/icaa035>., and Kulish, Nancy M. "The Mental Representation of the Clitoris: The Fear of Female Sexuality." *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1991, pp. 511–536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07351699109533873>.

¹⁰⁸ In an interesting parallel, John Tyndall also died by poisoning, albeit his was an overdose of the sleeping medication chloral hydrate, accidentally administered by his wife Louisa in 1893.

¹⁰⁹ In analogue darkroom photography the "fix" is the chemical bath that comes after developer and stop baths, and renders the print no longer sensitive to light. The image is therefore "fixed" and unable to change (darken).

¹¹⁰ Much has been written about spirit photography. See, for example, John Harvey's 2007 book *Photography and Spirit, The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs* (2023) edited by Serena Keshavjee, and the 2005 catalogue to the exhibition "The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult" held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and printed by Yale University Press.

¹¹¹ For more on the importance of tables as objects see Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* pp. 30-31.

¹¹² Fingerprint evidence began to be accepted in English courts of law in 1901. For more on this see: Leadbetter, Martin J. "Fingerprint Evidence in England and Wales—The Revised Standard." *Medicine, Science, and the Law*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2005, pp. 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1258/rsmmsl.45.1.1>.

¹¹³ Crawford notes that he does not consider payment in and of itself to be evidence of fraud writing, "I need hardly say that if money be the chief and only object of the medium's ambition, practically no experimental work can be done. It is a matter of experience—my experience, anyway—that the medium and sitters must not develop any form of material greed, or the phenomena become undependable and unreliable. This

does not mean, of course, that a medium may not take reasonable remuneration; but it decidedly means that if she is purely and absolutely concerned with the amount of money she can make out of her psychic gifts, her phenomena suffer” (*Reality of Psychic Phenomena* 4). By 1920 Crawford had begun to give some money to the Golighers, perhaps reflecting the compensation he received from his books or speaking engagements.

¹¹⁴ The Ouija board, patented in Baltimore in 1891 as a parlor game, was as much a product of capitalism as Spiritualism. For more on its history see: Cole, Dorian. *Speak of the Devil: A History of the Ouija Board*, University of Delaware, United States – Delaware, 2024. *ProQuest*, <https://ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/speak-devil-history-ouija-board/docview/3106520415/se-2>.

¹¹⁵ For more on the Irish War of Independence see: Hopkinson, Michael. *The Irish War of Independence*. Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen’s UP, 2002.

¹¹⁶ This older male investigator/teenage female performer dynamic is similarly reflected in the story of the “Fox Sisters” Kate and Margaret Fox, who played an important role in the advent of the Spiritualist movement.

¹¹⁷ To be clear, this is my intervention. There is no evidence that Crawford was familiar with burlesque performance and I certainly doubt that he wrote this book with the intention – or even awareness – that it could be read this way.

¹¹⁸ Scholars have mined this connection between BDSM and performance, including art historian Kathy O’Dell’s 1998 book *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Ninetta Crummles in Charles Dickens’ *Nicholas Nickleby*.

¹²⁰ Kathleen Goligher was certainly a toppy-switch in the context of her directing the séances.

¹²¹ This one’s for you, Shan. For everyone else – see: Bell, Shannon. *Fast Feminism*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2010.

¹²² For more on performing birth, see Della Pollock’s 1999 book *Telling Bodies, Performing Birth*.

¹²³ It feels important to note here that two well-loved technologies of female/AFAB orgasm are the rabbit and the magic wand.

¹²⁴ I am thankful to my supervisor Dr. Laura Levin for bringing this source to my attention.

¹²⁵ Here, as elsewhere I am building on the work of Rebecca Schneider.

¹²⁶ In the years since its original publication in 1999 Maines' book has been subject to something of its own debunking. In their 2018 paper "A Failure of Academic Quality Control: *The Technology of Orgasm*" Hallie Lieberman and Eric Schatzberg claim, "We found no evidence in [Maines'] sources that physicians ever used electromechanical vibrators to induce orgasms in female patients as medical treatment" (Abstract). In response, Maines stated that it was presented in her book as a hypothesis. Given the practice of Victorian medical and scientific texts often demurring (as I have established with Crawford) I believe that an absence of explicit mention in the literature does not prove that it did not happen. In any case, Maines' scholarship regarding attitudes towards female sexuality and pleasure during the Victorian era stands. Lieberman and Schatzberg's paper can be read here: <http://journalofpositivesexuality.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Failure-of-Academic-Quality-Control-Technology-of-Orgasm-Lieberman-Schatzberg.pdf>.

¹²⁷ There seems to be a relevant connection between the men of science and contemporary techno-optimist "bro" types, who place a great degree of focus on how technology will "save us," while seemingly ignoring, or looking past, the embodied subjectivities of others.

¹²⁸ One of the important political objectives of the Women's Liberation movement (now known as second-wave feminism) was the demystification of women's bodies and sexuality. Texts like the classic *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, originally published in 1970 by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective encouraged women to use a hand mirror, flashlight, and speculum in order to better understand their own bodies. In the supposedly "post-feminist" current era this idea has been coopted by capitalism, and there are currently multiple products specifically marketed for this purpose. One such item, sold by the company *Feel Better Naked* is called "The G.E.M. (Genital Examination Mirror)." The sunny-yellow, triangular shaped device sells for USD \$34 and the chipper ad-copy notes, "You shouldn't have to be an acrobat to get a look below the belt... Spread 'em and get to know thyself" (https://awkwardessentials.com/en-ca/products/the-g-e-m-genital-examination-mirror-1?srltid=AfmBOoqjHhLcn_DU0LuES4k8wPE_2FHplHPzZ2MIYWWqyR8g_nO2vp). The good news for anyone with a pussy and curiosity, but not \$34, is that any mirror will do.

¹²⁹ Named after philanthropist Thomas Guy who founded the hospital in 1721, it was a "Guy's" hospital in more than one sense. In 1895 – the year that Beadnell earned his surgical qualifications at the ripe old age of 23 – both the Royal Collage of Surgeons of England and the Royal College of Physicians rejected a petition that the College

examinations should be open to women. The first woman to become a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons was Eleanor Davies-Colley in 1911 (Ellis 118).

¹³⁰ By the time of his death in 1947 Beadnell had achieved the rank of Surgeon Rear-Admiral (Beadnell, obituary).

¹³¹ “If people want to be deceived, let them be deceived.”

¹³² For a detailed account of the intellectual biography of Fournier d’Albe see, Stewart, Ian B. “E.E. Fournier d’Albe’s Fin de Siècle: Science, Nationalism and Monistic Philosophy in Britain and Ireland.” *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 14, no. 5, 2017, pp. 599–620. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2017.1375721>.

¹³³ Fournier d’Albe’s octophone was, “was a pioneering attempt at optical character recognition; selenium detectors scanned lines of typescript and registered the changes in brightness of printed characters; varying electrical signals generated musical tones which could be recognised by trained operators. The only practical use of such a device at the time, before the invention of the electronic computer, was in helping blind people to read ordinary printed material, and it was widely welcomed though not very widely adopted; only a few blind people became expert” (Lunney, “Fournier d’Albe, Edmund Edward”). Fournier d’Albe’s experimentation with language and communication has a clear connection to Spiritualism’s quest to reach the spirit realm.

¹³⁴ With Carolyn Dinshaw’s notion of “touching time” in mind, I imagine that Goligher could very well respond with a, “don’t touch me!”

¹³⁵ Of course, some Spiritualist performances/demonstrations did take place on stage, for example the Fox Sister’s tour of American cities. Likewise, the home was sometimes the site of theatre, as with Victorian drawing room plays. For more on this, see: Logan, Thad. *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study*. Cambridge UP, 2001. and Mazur, Ann. *The Nineteenth-Century Home Theatre: Women and Material Space*. University of Virginia, 2014.

¹³⁶ Similar to the medieval notion of the artist as a conduit of the divine.

¹³⁷ The closest we have to this is a letter from Goligher to E.E. Fournier d’Albe (published in his book on the Goligher circle) where she declines to sit for any more séances/experiments with him. And, as I point out, she may have had a high degree of agency within her family circle regarding her status and performance conditions.

¹³⁸ These are of course gross oversimplifications/flattening of important and complex histories that are used here to make a point.

¹³⁹ See, for example, Braybon, Gail. *Women Workers in the First World War*. London: Routledge, 1981.

¹⁴⁰ Though by invoking the maternal, perhaps these matrices of performers can be thought of in relation to matrilineality.

¹⁴¹ Given the (erroneous) conflation between explicit body art and pornography it is interesting, if not surprising that *Being Green* (in which Dobkin is painted like Kermit the frog and lip-syncs to “Rainbow Connection” while being fisted by her scene partner who is dressed as Jim Henson) is available to watch in full on a porn site. The video is tagged: lesbian, fisting (https://xxxdan.com/xdz9a/jess-dobkin-being-green.html?utm_campaign=cd9176ea3e7da2d3cc928d29b71de819&utm_source=video4k.cc&utm_medium=cpc&asgtbndr=1).

¹⁴² It should not surprise the reader to know that I have been one such student.

¹⁴³ See for example Joanna Frueh’s 2003 article “Vaginal Aesthetics” in *Hypatia*.

¹⁴⁴ See for example, Flowers, Regina M., "Material and Motion: Phenomenology and the Early Work of Carolee Schneemann 1957-1973" (2012). Theses, Dissertations, and Student Creative Activity, School of Art, Art History and Design. 24. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/artstudents/24>, Widrich, Mechtild. “Imaging Her Aesthetics.” *Art Journal*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2017, pp. 209–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2017.1332922>., Gorfinkel, Elena. “Vulvic Space.” *Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics*, edited by Lotte Johnson and Chris Bayley, Yale University Press, 2022, pp. 215–234., and Johnson, Claire. *Femininity, Time and Feminist Art*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

¹⁴⁵ See, for example: Williams, Linda. “A Provoking Agent: The Pornography and Performance Art of Annie Sprinkle.” *Social Text*, no. 37, 1993, pp. 117–33. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466263>., Campbell, Patrick. “Censoring the Body: Whores, Goddesses and Annie Sprinkle.” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2000, pp. 53–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486800008568596>., Augsburg, Tanya, et al. “Ars Eroticas of Their Own Making.” *A Companion to Feminist Art*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2019, pp. 493–512, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118929179.ch28>., and Goodman, Lizbeth. “Sexuality and Autobiography in Performance (Art).” *Women (Oxford, England)*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1994, pp. 123–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574049408578191>.

¹⁴⁶ See my mention in Chapter 1 of this dissertation of Schneider’s slippery play with secret/secrete.

¹⁴⁷ An example of someone who writes about the sacred feminine from a position of genuine belief and devotion include, Queen Afua’s 2000 book *Sacred Woman: A Guide to Healing the Feminine Body, Mind and Spirit*. For a more scholarly take on the concept

see Rosemary Ruether's *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (2005).

¹⁴⁸ See, for example, Jess Dobkin's inclusion of a box labeled "woo" in the archival space of her 2021 exhibition "Wetrospective" at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU).

¹⁴⁹ A 2019 trend piece by Amanda Hess in *The New York Times* notes a resurgence of interest in the book amongst young women. Hess writes, "A generation later, 'Women Who Run With the Wolves' has returned to a culture suddenly lush with primal visions of women's bodies – dripping with blood, coursing with hormones and pulsing with pain and arousal." Hess, Amanda. "The Wild Woman Awakens." *The New York Times*, 17 Dec., 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/17/arts/Women-Who-Run-With-the-Wolves.html>.

¹⁵⁰ Interestingly, this places Schneemann's 1975 piece and her invocation of goddess imagery during the period where it was still in vogue. On the other hand, Sprinkle's piece, was first performed at the end of the 1980s by which time goddess feminism had already been loudly rejected by many feminist theorists and art critics. For more on the trajectory and specific actors in this debate see Jennie Klein's book.

¹⁵¹ See also: "Performance Art as Spiritual Practice" (2019) by Gilson Motta and Tania Alice, which connects itinerant performances and Buddhist practice.

¹⁵² For more on this see: Wouter J. Hanegraaf's chapter "New Age religion" in the 2002 anthology *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and transformations*.

¹⁵³ At least every primitive community "studied by trustworthy and competent observers" (presumably, like him) he qualifies (Malinowski 17).

¹⁵⁴ See also, Tomàs Power's 2018 book, *Queer Magic: LGBT+ Spirituality and Culture from Around the World*.

¹⁵⁵ I am not personally into astrology but as a self-respecting lesbian I at the very least know my sun, moon, rising, and birth time (if you know, you know).

¹⁵⁶ In the introduction to *A Magician Among the Spirits* Houdini admits, "my love for a mild sensation" (xi).

¹⁵⁷ A somewhat complex twist to the story of Houdini as a debunker of Spiritualism is the apparent fact that he very much did want to believe. Houdini – arguably one of the greatest "mamma's boy's" in history (The dedication to his 1924 debunker tour-de-force *A Magician Among The Spirits* reads: "In worshipful homage I dedicate this book to the memory of my sainted mother. If God in his infinite wisdom ever sent an angel upon earth in human form it was my mother.") – wanted to believe that there was a mechanism

by which he would be able to communicate with his beloved late mother. He also famously held a pact with his wife Bess that whichever of them died first die, via séance, communicate the previously agreed upon code phrase, “Rosabelle believe,” to the other. Bess held up her end of the agreement, reportedly holding annual séances on Halloween for the ten years following her husband’s death.

¹⁵⁸ In her 2024 article “Repertoire, Relation and Technique: Mapping magic’s habits” Aileen K. Robinson analyzes how the routinized habits of magical performance (such as sleight-of-hand and misdirection) can be understood as a perceptual and physical strategy.

¹⁵⁹ A modern example of this (though generally undertaken with a higher degree of goodwill and playfulness) is the magician duo Penn and Teller, who have made careers of explaining how magic tricks are done and soliciting the performances of magicians who believe they can trick them.

¹⁶⁰ Hypermasculine tough-guy until the end, Houdini died in what is perhaps the most absurd and preventable way: a punch to the stomach (a regular part of his repertoire) by an audience member before he had the chance to engage his core in order to protect his organs. Rosabelle, *why?!*

¹⁶¹ For more on the NEA Four case see: Lisa A. Freeman’s chapter “Adjudicating Bodies Public in *NEA v. Finley*” in her book *Antitheatricality and the Body Public* (2017), and also Schechner, Richard. “Political Realities, the Enemy within, the NEA, and You.” *TDR* (1988-), vol. 34, no. 4, 1990, pp. 7–10. and, Noriega, Jimmy A., and Jordan Schildcrout. “The Nea Four: Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller.” *Fifty Key Figures in Queer US Theatre*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2023, pp. 179–83.

¹⁶² Appropriately, deemed the “International Women’s Year” by the United Nations. This was also tied to various funding initiatives related to women’s art including, in Canada, the foundation of the National Film Board’s all-woman unit “Studio D.” For more on this see Gail Vanstone’s 2007 book *D is for Daring: The women behind the films of Studio D*.

¹⁶³ Schneemann would later claim that this was actually in response to a woman, film critic Annette Michelson, though as art historian Victoria Horne notes, “to my knowledge, no one has questioned whether this was true at the time of the performance or an embellishment added after the fact, given the context of 1980s feminist criticism” (1000).

¹⁶⁴ The truth to this debunking is evidenced in the ongoing interest and engagement with Schneemann’s work, and in particular *Interior Scroll*.

¹⁶⁵ It is referred to in various places as either, and was perhaps both.

¹⁶⁶ For more on this see Amanda J. Lucia's *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals* (2020).

¹⁶⁷ Schneemann expressed dismay that the iconic image of her pulling the scroll of paper from her pussy (duplicated endlessly in textbooks and media) was what she came to be most associated with. In a 2001 interview with Michael Bracewell she is quoted as saying, "I seem to be known for two iconic images [one of them a shot of the *Interior Scroll* performance], which have transplanted a huge body of more complex work" (<https://www.frieze.com/article/other-voices>).

¹⁶⁸ For more on disidentification see José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999).

¹⁶⁹ Sprinkle's first foray into the art world was her 1984 presentation of "Deep Inside Porn Stars" at Franklin Furnace in New York City.

¹⁷⁰ For more on the sacred prostitutes of antiquity see Shannon Bell's *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (1994).

¹⁷¹ The video starts with a message that scrolls up the screen apologizing to Annie for the poor recording quality, inserting the spectator in a delightful parent-attending-a-recital fashion ("Dear Annie, We really enjoyed the show. Sorry about the fucked-up video quality, but I had a broken tripod and a broken wrist. Lots of love, Ronny and Rebecca Novick").

¹⁷² In *Public Privates* (1997) Terri Kapsalis notes that Sprinkle also taken on the role of the educator in her film and video work, for example her 1992 video (co-created with Maria Beatty) *Sluts and Goddesses*, which acts as, "a 'how-to' piece for female sexual and spiritual pleasure" (124).

¹⁷³ In contrast to other performance artists who have integrated performances of scientist or researcher into their work – I am thinking here of the self-serious Marina Abramović, who since 2012 has donned a lab coat as a part of her "Abramović Method" and sometimes distributes them to participants who are willing/able to pay the €2450 she charges for 5-day workshops with her "Marina Abramović Institute."

¹⁷⁴ To watch the performance recording is to get to experience all of Sprinkle's quips that are absent from the script, and to be able to see what an easeful performer she is. In particular, Sprinkle is adept at interacting with/forging intimacy with strangers, a skill no doubt learned through her sex work.

¹⁷⁵ As anyone with a vagina who has received competent health education knows, vaginas are self-cleaning (magic?) and, from a medical perspective, douching is actually discouraged.

¹⁷⁶ Angeliños and, more generally, Californian’s embrace of New Age and “wellness” leaders extends to their elected officials – see the (failed) campaigns for the democratic nomination in the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections of Marianne Williamson, a former spiritual leader and New Age self-help guru. RFK Jr., on the other hand, was recently elevated from the role of conspiracy-minded embarrassment of the Kennedy clan to the US Secretary of Health and Human Services. Kennedy is a loud proponent of wellness trends and an anti-vaccine activist, and his new position within government gives him unparalleled power to enact policy in favour of his anti-scientific claims.

¹⁷⁷ For more on this see *New Age Capitalism* (2000) by Kimberly J. Lau.

¹⁷⁸ At this point during the recorded performance Sprinkle momentarily breaks character. Instead of simply holding her leg as asked, a man named Harry who volunteers to come on stage demonstrates a keen interest in mugging for the camera and puts his face in Sprinkle’s crotch to mime cunnilingus. In a blink-and-you-would-miss-it moment Sprinkle registers the alarm of what is happening, pushes him away, then nervously attempts to laugh it off with the audience. It is a telling moment that exemplifies how quickly boundaries can be crossed when a woman’s performance of hyper-sexuality translates into an assumption of consent. It is also in this moment that Sprinkle’s years of experience as a sex worker are visible in speed with which she rolls with Harry’s overstep and recovers her performance.

¹⁷⁹ See also, Rohrabacher’s decades long record of voting against abortion and civil rights protections (https://www.ontheissues.org/ca/Dana_Rohrabacher.htm).

¹⁸⁰ During the PPM intermission Sprinkle offered tits-on-your-head photos, “only five dollars, special student rate.” She thus engages in sex work during her performance downtime, a savvy move, and probably the most money she made off of the show. There is an incredible moment in the video at 53:15 when Sprinkle’s tits get caught on a man’s toupee and cause it to flip up, and the videographer – to their credit – slows the footage down.

¹⁸¹ Montano is herself known for her engagement with spiritual imagery that tends towards the “woo woo” side of things; see her “Sister Rosita’s Summer Saint Camp,” where she played guru. Jennifer Fisher has a chapter on Montano and her work, “The Chakra Cycles of Linda M. Montano” in *Technologies of Intuition*.

¹⁸² For more on this see the 2024 article by Rachel Treisman, “RFK Jr. admits to dumping a dead bear in Central Park, solving a decade-old mystery.”

¹⁸³ See the myriad attacks on transgender rights by US President Donald Trump, including his executive order, signed on his first day back in office in 2025, declaring that there are only two sexes – which, ideology and politics aside, is a scientifically erroneous claim that denies the very real existence of intersex people

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/20/us/politics/trump-transgender-race-education.html> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/11/us/transgender-trump-executive-orders.html>). In Canada, the province of Alberta has led the charge against trans people, passing discriminatory laws that limit access to healthcare, ban trans women from sport, and restrict children from using chosen names and pronouns in schools (<https://ccla.org/press-release/ccla-condemn-albertas-proposed-use-of-the-notwithstanding-clause-to-target-transcommunities/#:~:text=Earlier%20this%20year%2C%20Alberta's%20government,girls%20from%20participating%20in%20sports.>)

¹⁸⁴ While I am dreaming of an endlessly funded project, it would not hurt to make a stop in the Alps to see if they inspired an awe, and attendant performance of rugged macho outdoorswomanship in me. It should go without saying that childcare would also be covered as a part of this fantasy research trip.

¹⁸⁵ The archive at the Cambridge University Library also holds a piece of ectoplasm/silk that was produced from Duncan's vagina, and is of an impressively large yardage. A photograph of this can be seen on the Cambridge Library website. Duncan is also a fascinating figure in that she was one of the last people to be prosecuted under the Witchcraft Act of 1735 (<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-SPR-ECTOPLASM/1>).

¹⁸⁶ And, following my extension of explicit body performance art to Spiritualist performances, this makes me think of Keith Boadwee's anus-spouting performances, especially *Purple Squirt* (1995), a personal favourite, wherein the artist squirted purple paint out of his ass onto a canvas – critiquing and lambasting the ejaculatory actions of hypermasculine abstract expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock.

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