# INCREDIBLE VOICES: INTIMACY, EMBODIMENT, AND BELIEF IN SÉANCES AND SMART TECH

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how theories and practices associated with early 20th century séances resurface in contemporary voice user interfaces, particularly AI voice assistants such as Amazon's Alexa. Addressing claims that "the future is voice," a recurring tagline accompanying products and research that advance voicing as more natural or seamless mode of human-computer interaction, I turn to modern Spiritualism and psychical research as a historical counterpoint that unsettles these assumptions. Séances comprise complex and contradictory vocal performances—what psychical researchers describe as "wildly incredible" phenomena—that both fracture and reify voice's presumed intimacy, naturalness, and human-ness. The practices associated with modern Spiritualism and psychical research also demonstrate a preoccupation with voice as means to verify, lend credibility, or cultivate faith in intangible systems, and indeed in technology as such—a strategy shared with proponents of contemporary AI exuberance. Voice—in both séances and contemporary tech—is characterized by ambivalences, contradictions, and co-presences; I interrogate the ways that voice, in these contexts, signals present non-presences (Chapter 2), conjures bodies while affirming a dream of disembodiment (Chapter 3), and troubles indexical ties to a singular speaking subject (Chapter 4). Drawing on perspectives from feminist STS, I further interrogate the ways that both séances and smart tech evoke gender and race as organizing principles, as tools for constructing connections and boundaries—whether confronting the unknown of the afterlife or the inscrutability of algorithmic systems and big data infrastructures. This dissertation comprises archival research into several Spiritualist circles operating in North America in the early 20th century, which share a notable emphasis on voice in their séance practices, as well as an analysis of contemporary discourse regarding voice user interfaces. I also interweave a discussion of

media artworks throughout, as a means to amplify resonances between the past and the present, and to further unsettle dominant cultural imaginaries regarding what voices are understood to be and do.

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At re:MARS 2022, Amazon's conference devoted to machine learning, automation, robotics, and space, Rohit Prasad, head scientist for Alexa AI, announced a new forthcoming capability for Alexa, the voice assistant housed in Amazon's line of Echo smart devices.[1] This new feature would allow the generation of high-quality synthesized speech from only one minute of recorded voice data using a novel text-to-speech (TTS) method developed by Alexa AI,[2] such that Alexa might harvest, encode, and simulate the voice of any user. Prasad began by describing the companionate relationships that many users have developed with Alexa, which "have become even more important in these times of the ongoing pandemic when so many of us have lost someone we love." "While AI can't eliminate that pain of loss," he continued, "it can definitely make their memories last." The presentation then included a short video dramatization in which a young child asks Alexa: "can Grandma finish reading me The Wizard of Oz?". "Okay," replied Alexa in the dulcet feminized voice that has become the hallmark of the Echo line before a different voice, that of an absent, and presumably deceased, grandmother, is heard, reading from the famous novel.

Prasad's demo of this as-yet unrealized featured comprised less than a minute and a half of a nearly two-hour keynote, yet tech publications and online commentators seized on this element of the presentation. Critics pointed out the troubling possibilities regarding audio deepfakes—in which AI-generated speech might be passed off as human speech, potentially in

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[1] AWS Events, "Amazon re:MARS 2022 – Day 2 – Keynote," YouTube, June 22, 2022, video, 1:54:23, https://youtu.be/22cb24-sGhg.

[2] Adam Gabrys, Goeric Huybrechts, Manuel Sam Ribeiro, Chung-Ming Chien, Julian Roth, Giulia Comini, Roberto Barra-Chicote, Bartek Perz, and Jaime Lorenzo-Trueba, "Voice Filter: Few-Shot Text-to-Speech Speaker Adaptation Using Voice Conversion as a Post-Processing Module," in *ICASSP 2022: IEEE International Conference on Acoustics, Speech and Signal Processing* (Singapore: IEEE, 2022): 7902–6. https://doi.org/10.1109/ICASSP43922.2022.9747239.

service of fraud or disinformation—should such an affordance come to fruition via an application as ubiquitous as Alexa. Commentators also called the proposed feature morbid, creepy, and "weird as hell."[3] Prasad was quick to point out that at no point did he specify that the grandmother in the scenario was in fact deceased—"this is not about dead grandma," he explained in a subsequent interview.[4] Yet the presentation, in its references to the pervasive grief caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, not only gestured towards reanimating the voices of the dead, but situated this possibility as a natural extension of Alexa's functionality.

In the decade since Apple's Siri voice assistant was launched as an integrated feature of the iPhone 4S in 2011, crystallizing a particular form of the long-standing cultural imaginary of the talking computer, voice user interfaces have become increasingly woven into the fabric of daily life—a trend that is likely to continue given the ongoing proliferation of AI integrations into quotidian technologies. Amazon especially has invested in developing and promoting voice-based ambient computing, such that Alexa is now, according to the company, available on "hundreds of millions of devices"[5] and hosts over 100,000 third-party "skills" that users can interact with vocally. Customers are encouraged to talk to their tech—not only to their Echo smart speakers, but to myriad devices with Alexa built in, including televisions, refrigerators, air conditioning units, home security systems, and cars. Amazon's strategic investment in voice technologies is seemingly committed to, and in turn re-iterates a conviction in, voicing as a universally intuitive and effortless human activity. The promise of voice implies that Alexa

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[3] James Vincent, "Amazon Shows off Alexa Feature That Mimics the Voices of Your Dead Relatives," The Verge, June 23, 2022, https://www.theverge.com/2022/6/23/23179748/amazon-alexa-feature-mimic-voice-dead-relative-ai.
[4] Brian Heater, "Alexa Goes down the Conversational Rabbit Hole." *TechCrunch* (blog), June 23, 2022. https://techcrunch.com/2022/06/23/alexa-goes-down-the-conversational-rabbit-hole/.
[5] "Alexa Utterance Guidelines," Amazon Developer website, accessed July 30, 2025, https://developer.amazon.com/en-US/alexa/branding/alexa-guidelines/brand-guidelines/speech-bubble.

operates in a sensory modality that is inherently better suited to human-computer interactions, offering more frictionless engagement with Amazon's platforms and services, since voice is "the most natural user interface."[6]

Alongside the presumed naturalness and ease of voice interfacing, Alexa's vocal expressiveness is also posited as a means to cultivate not only more frequent, but more intimate exchanges between users and cloud-based platforms. As Prasad stated in his presentation at re:MARS 2022, "human empathy and affect are key for building trust." Indeed, throughout Amazon's corporate rhetoric, voice is explicitly coupled with human-ness in such a way that one never hears of haptic interfaces that involve typing or swiping described as experiences oriented around "the human touch." The presumed intimacy and sentimentality of voice is mobilized as a means by which Amazon might become increasingly embedded into the familial and domestic lives of its users. Alexa is increasingly figured not only as a virtual assistant, but as a care provider: a line of colourful Echo Kids devices offer to manage children's daily routines, help with homework, and read bedtime stories, while subscription services like Alexa Together promise to provide care and companionship to older adults living alone, as well as a means for family members to monitor them.

The prospect of Alexa being able to speak to users in the voice of a loved one might be understood within this program for Alexa's development—a next step in cultivating a sense of trust and intimacy via the voice that Amazon understands to be necessary for greater engagement with their devices and platforms. Indeed, "the future is voice" has become a prominent and

[6] "Alexa Skills Kit," Amazon Developer website, accessed September 12, 2024, https://developer.amazon.com/en-US/alexa/alexa-skills-kit.

recurring tag line for Amazon's products and research.[7] Yet the introduction of voice cloning also signals a moment of rupture: Alexa's default feminized voice, which has come to dominate the cultural imaginary regarding digital assistants, gives way to a hyper-specific voice. Crucially, the cloned voice, which, in the context of Prasad's keynote at re:MARS, was meant to signal Amazon's leadership in generative AI, takes a ghostly form. This anticipated cutting-edge affordance arrives as a specter. In order to make low-resource TTS exciting and meaningful, Prasad evokes the voices of the dead—a paradoxically *unheimlich*, or unhomely,[8] use case scenario to domesticate a new technology. Not only is this framing uncanny in the sense that it deals in ghostly imagery, but the narrative itself—that new technology promises a means to transcend death—might be understood as uncanny in the sense that it recurs.[9] What crops up here, as Amazon extends Alexa's functionality through more sophisticated deep learning models, is a very familiar strangeness.[10]

In *Haunted Media,* Jeffrey Sconce enumerates several "recurring fictions … that appear in new incarnations with the advent of each new media," including their ability to generate uncanny forms of disembodiment and facilitate access to an "electronic elsewhere."[11] While these familiar narratives that Sconce describes are certainly at work in the re:MARS

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[7] See, for example, Alexa Developers, "Mark Cuban: Voice, Ambient Computing are the Future and Why Developers Should Get in Now," YouTube, March 25, 2019, video, 2:10. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOWXIWJF3lk.

[8] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, David McLintock (trans.) (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), 2.

[9] Freud, *The Uncanny*, 124.

[10] Alexa is far from the only recent technology re-circulating necro-vocal fictions in the context of generative AI. Indeed, the re:MARS presentation might signal Amazon's hedging towards the blossoming grief tech industry. SéanceAI, for example, is an app that generates a representation of deceased individuals based on text inputs, such that users might converse with a simulation of their loved one via chat interface, with premium features including voice re-creation and animated images. HereAfterAI, in contrast, asks customers to pre-emptively record their speech such that it might be re-animated following their death. See "HereAfter AI — Interactive Memory App," accessed August 9, 2025. https://hereafter.ai; "Seance AI - Commune with Lost Friends and Family via AI," accessed August 9, 2025; https://seanceai.com/.

[11] Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 8-9.

presentation, I offer up this example as evidence of an even more specific imaginary: the necro-vocal promise to revivify the voices of the dead that resurfaces alongside new media technologies. The invention of phonography in the late 19th century in particular advanced promises to embalm the voice such that it might be re-played with perfect fidelity long after the death of the speaker or singer, and indeed, this promise functioned as a cultural testament to the affective power of recorded sound.[12] As John Durham Peters describes, recording advanced a belief that "one can build a mausoleum of sound, fixed in a state of suspended animation."[13] In the re:MARS presentation, the promise to immortalize the voice is similarly being mobilized in a contemporary context to demonstrate the purportedly miraculous, poignant, and death-defying possibilities of generative AI.

Yet if phonography was premised upon preservation and fixity, Alexa's promise of conversing with the deceased relies on an altogether different logic. Peters notes that the phonograph was characterized by its "simultaneous promiscuity and invariance:"[14] while it allowed for the reproduction and mass distribution of sound and voice, the substance of recorded sound was an unchanging index of a particular sonic event. The question, and indeed anxiety, around the promiscuity of mediated voices remains at stake in cultural debates regarding voice cloning, which consider how voices might circulate beyond the agency of their utterers.[15] In contrast, however, to recorded sound, voice cloning is meaningful precisely because of its

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[12] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 289.
[13] John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 162.
[14] Peters, *Speaking into the Air,* 163.
[15] Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut make a similar argument in their discussion of "intermundane" collaborations between living and deceased musicians, suggesting that "being recorded means being enrolled in futures (and pasts) that one cannot wholly predict nor control." See Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, "Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane," *TDR* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 18. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40650520.

variability: the promise it makes to users that they might hear their loved ones speak words that went unsaid during their lifetime. In this regard, the necro-vocal imaginary at work in the re:MARS presentation extends and revises the promises associated with modern recording media, staging an exchange more akin to a séance, which, according to Peters, "suggests a live interchange between the living and the dead."[16] Rather than building a mausoleum, Alexa acts as an interface that facilitates conversational encounters with re-vivified voices. In this scenario, Alexa's default persona vanishes in a manner akin to a spirit medium, a similarly feminized present non-presence that allows the voices of others to be channeled through her.

This dissertation takes up the invitation that the re:MARS presentation extends: to take séances seriously as media events that continue to shape contemporary voice user interfaces. The recurrence of this necro-vocal fiction creates an opening to think with séances as a means to unsettle broader claims and investments in the new-ness of AI and inevitability of its development. Séances comprise complex and contradictory vocal performances that, much like voice user interfaces, both fracture and reify voice's presumed intimacy, naturalness, and human-ness. The practices associated with modern Spiritualism and psychical research also demonstrate a preoccupation with voice as means to verify, lend credibility, or cultivate faith in intangible systems, and indeed in technology as such—a strategy shared with proponents of contemporary AI exuberance. I therefore explicate séances and smart tech together, seeking to set resonances in motion that trouble the promises about voice upon which they respectively rely.

### 1.1 Mediumship, Gender, Technology

The history of the séance that I take up here is derived from the modern Spiritualist movement, which emerged and came to prominence in North America following a series of

[16] Peters, *Speaking into the Air,* 154.

communications facilitated by teenaged sisters Kate and Maggie Fox through "rappings" in their home in upstate New York in 1848. These events catalyzed a widespread cultural fascination with the endurance of life after death and the possibility of establishing channels of communication between this world and the next—beliefs that became the central tenets of Spiritualism. In subsequent decades, Spiritualism proliferated into a transnational movement[17] that blurred the lines between religious pursuit, popular pastime, and scientific experiment. Although Spiritualism occupied a prominent place within public culture—with practitioners proselytizing through lecture circuits, spectacular demonstrations of spirit phenomena, a robust Spiritualist press, and formal institutions devoted to its study—the primary locus of Spiritualist practice remained in private homes, among gatherings of friends, family, and neighbours. Diverse practices and methods for facilitating spirit communication thus evolved from experiments conducted within domestic séance circles.

From its inception, Spiritualism and media technologies were mutually imbricated with one another. Numerous scholars have noted a relationship between the development of the Spiritualist movement and the advent of telegraphy, since the "rappings" that comprised the Fox sisters' first spirit contact emerged only four years following the successful implementation of the Baltimore-Washington telegraph line, the first long distance over-land connection in North America, and closely emulated Morse code in their rhythmic delivery of messages. [18] The modes of telepresence afforded by telegraphy—"sustaining contact with various 'worlds beyond'"[19] —

[17] For more on Spiritualism as a "travelling theory" that traversed the circum-Atlantic world, see Jeremy Stolow, "Wired Religion: Spiritualism and Telegraphic Globalization in the Nineteenth Century," in *Empires and Autonomy: Moments in the History of Globalization*, edited by Stephen M. Streeter, John Weaver, and William D. Coleman (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 83.
[18] Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 95; Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 24; Stolow, "Wired Religion," 79.
[19] Stolow, *Wired Religion*, 80.

provided the grounds for seeking out lines of connection not only across distances, but across intermundane registers. Indeed, Spiritualists hypothesized that the spirits with whom they communicated were in possession of a "spiritual telegraph," whereby spirits translated their messages into code and transmitted them using an analogous device in another sphere.[20] The role of spirit mediums—individuals sensitive to the presence of spirit and susceptible to the trance states that permitted their manifesting—was therefore understood as a crucial mechanism with the apparatus of the séance: a point of relay for conducting and translating coded electrical signals.

More than simply appropriating metaphors from contemporary technoculture, the evolution of Spiritualist practices and imaginaries over the late 19th and early 20th century suggests a nuanced symbiosis, in which Spiritualism "both reflected and informed the development of new technologies."[21] Spirit communications quickly outgrew a reliance on telegraphic tapping, becoming more elaborate and multimodal in response to advancements in the technological milieu. The growing prominence of disembodied spirit voicing in séances, and the accompanying conviction that voice is a particularly reliable or authentic manifestation of presence, might be understood to correspond with the invention of both the telephone and phonograph in the 1870s.[22] Not only, however, did séances emulate emerging media, they provided a practical testing ground for mechanical principles that went on to inform the development of secular technologies. The invention of the first commercial writer, for example,

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[20] Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 2000: 36; Anthony Enns, "Spiritualist Writing Machines: Telegraphy, Typtology, Typewriting," *communication +1* 4, no. 1 (2015): 6.
[21] Enns, "Spiritualist Writing Machines," 3.
[22] Steven Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost: Spiritualism, Technology and the 'Direct Voice,'" in *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, edited by Peter Buse and Andrew McConnell Stott (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 212-13.

pioneered by devoted Spiritualist Christopher Latham Sholes, incorporated mechanical principles drawn from alphabetic typtology—a common technique in séances for aligning raps different letters of the alphabet.[23] Moreover, Spiritualism acted as a conceptual reservoir for making sense of new and seemingly miraculous technologies. Allusions to Spiritualist séances were prominent among accounts from journalists and spectators bearing witness to Alexander Graham Bell's early demonstrations of telephony.[24] Bell's own assistant, Thomas Watson, was also a practicing Spiritualist, and understood the electrical static produced by the telephone in otherworldly terms.[25]

In this way, the belief in spirit was intimately coupled with faith in technology, with each laying the grounds of possibility and lending credibility to the other. For practicing Spiritualists, the séance was crucially "not simply *like* a technology, but an intricate technological event itself"[26]—an arena in which technical principles were put into practice to craft "a delicate machine through which phenomena emerged."[27] The operation of a successful séance was therefore a matter of engineering as much as religious devotion, with practitioners understanding the necessity of building a material infrastructure that could facilitate and enhance manifestations of spirit. As Chapter 2 discusses in greater depth, séances were routinely figured as a kind battery that drew from the energies of the sitters to generate supernormal phenomena. Bodies and

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[23] Enns, "Spiritualist Writing Machines," 10-16.
[24] Anthony Enns,"Voices of the Dead: Transmission/Translation/Transgression," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 46, no. 1 (2005): 15.
[25] Enns, "Voices of the Dead," 15; see also Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.
[26] Jill Galvan, "The Victorian Post-Human: Transmission, Information and the Séance," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, edited by Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 80.
[27] Beth A. Robertson, *Science of the Séance: Transnational Networks and Gendered Bodies in the Study of Psychic Phenomena, 1918-40* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 161.

objects in the séance room were placed in accordance with the prevailing principles of electromagnetism, with male and female sitters placed alternately in the circle according to their respective positive and negative charges in order to maintain an energetic balance.[28]

The figuration of the spirit battery—which allocates positivity, activity, and intellect as necessarily masculine attributes and negativity, receptivity, and passivity as opposing and de facto feminine qualities—also makes plain the prominent function of gender in Spiritualists logics and practices. Indeed, this essentialist binarism is also at work in the feminine coding of mediumship, as spiritualists believed that women—on account of their innate sensitivity and susceptibility—were predisposed for the task of relinquishing agency in order to function as an empty channel for spirit communications.[29] A more delicate constitution and lack of independent will or strong intellect—qualities more readily attributed to women—were considered prerequisites for successful mediumship.

Séances comprise practices that at once collude with rigid Victorian constructions of gender, while also provided a means to test, undermine, and rework these conventions.[30] Given the reliance on feminine attributes for the functioning of a successful séance, women were granted a prominent role within the Spiritualist movement, even if this prominence was predicated upon their ability to perform their acquiescence to spirit agencies. Ann Braude documents the fame and notoriety achieved by several female mediums in mid-19th century, who toured America delivering public lectures. The crucial caveat, however, is that these lectures

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[28] Sconce 2000, *Haunted Media*, 29; Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 158.
[29] Sconce 2000, *Haunted Media*, 26.
[30] Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 203.

were delivered in trance; the women on stage were considered passive vehicles, "presenting not their own views but those of the spirits who spoke through them."[31] Nonetheless, trance provided the ground, albeit a shaky one, from which women might advocate for social and political causes, such as abolition, suffrage, temperance, and free love. Braude therefore describes trance speaking as a "transitional phase:"[32] a means for women "to discard limitations on women's role without questioning accepted ideas about woman's nature."[33] Theses complex ventriloquial vocal politics thus afforded mediums a new, albeit circuitous, mode of expression.[34]

Moreover, the séance itself—as a spatially and temporally contained event—sanctioned behaviours and relations that transgressed gendered notions of propriety, as well as cis-hetero embodiment. As Alex Owen describes: "what the séance promised was the ritualized violation of cultural norms."[35] Séances provided an arena in which expectations regarding decency and decorum were suspended; in addition to the requisite hand-holding among participants in the circle, mediums, under the aegis of spirit, facilitated intimate tactile encounters, such as caressing and kissing, that would have been considered highly improper beyond the séance room.[36] Trance also provided an alibi for obscene or profane speech or writing, which a medium might execute but could not be held accountable.[37] More broadly, the subjective porosity of trance mediumship, in which the body of the medium played host to numerous spirits, also

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[31] Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 85.
[32] Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 98.
[33] Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 83.
[34] Claudie Massicotte, *Trance Speakers: Femininity and Authorship in Spiritual Séances, 1850-1930* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 7.
[35] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 203.
[36] Marlene Tromp, "Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage, and Victorian Spiritualism," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31, no. 1 (2003): 67. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25058614.
[37] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 215.

comprised a kind of transformative or transgressive encounter. Female mediums were routinely inhabited by male spirits (and vice versa), assuming physical dispositions and audibly distinct voices associated with the opposite sex. Séances therefore troubled the presumed fixity of gendered embodiments, creating amenable conditions for queer performances and intimacies.

The construction of gender in and through séance practices is additionally complicated by the fact that mediumship, although broadly feminine-coded, was not exclusively carried out by women. Indeed, several male mediums feature prominently in my archival research. As Molly McGarry explains: while "women of any class or background would have been understood as having the attributes of a potential medium," men could, under certain conditions, still possess "the passiveness of mind befitting of their spiritual calling."[38] McGarry's account of several prominent 19th century male mediums demonstrates the ways that such fragility and sensitivity could also be inscribed through markers associated with class, such as "humble origins" and a lack of formal education, as well as unconventional sexual preferences, a "slight and delicate temperament," and effeminate mannerisms.[39] The ways that mediums' feminized passivity could be inferred via traits that did not necessarily correspond to their biological sex, and the durability of mediumship's feminization despite this lack of correspondence, attests to the complex ways in which gender is constructed and instrumentalized in the context of Spiritualism, as well the need for intersectional analysis in its study.

There is a profound ambivalence, therefore, in the politics of gender, and indeed race and class, associated with the Spiritualist movement and its belief systems. Peripheral to both

[38] McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past,* 132.
[39] McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 161-170.

mainstream science and Christianity, séance practices re-imagined and revised these dominant discourses while still adhering to and upholding many of their core principles. Christine Ferguson observes that the revival in academic interest in modern Spiritualism in recent decades has tended to amplify its subversive and emancipatory dimensions, often over-homogenizing the politics aims of its practitioners and neglecting the movement's investments in, and role in perpetuating, various modes of oppression and discrimination.[40] Indeed, some more recent scholarship has begun to reckon with imbrication between Spiritualism and racial essentialism, eugenics, and settler colonialism.[41] I therefore seek to cultivate an approach to séance practices that stays with these troubling ambivalences—that attends to the queer gestures and affects that unsettle prevailing social hierarchies, as well as the ways that these hierarchies not only persist but are reaffirmed in and by these same practices. Séances might therefore be understood not only as gendered technologies, but as practices that technologize both race and gender—deploying these categories as tools for constructing relations, for organizing, stratifying, and sanctifying paranormal pursuits, and for mapping the unknown. [42]

This dissertation makes the argument that smart tech similarly evokes gender and race as organizing principles, as tools for constructing connections and boundaries, with the unknown of the afterlife replaced with the inscrutability of algorithmic systems and big data infrastructures. Séance logics persist in the not-so-surreptitious ways that inequities are reproduced by

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[40] Christine Ferguson, *Determined Spirits: Eugenics, Heredity and Racial Regeneration in Anglo-American Spiritualist Writing, 1848-1930* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 2; Christine Ferguson, "Recent Studies in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism," *Literature Compass* 9, no. 6 (2012): 432. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2012.00890.x.

[41] See Ferguson, *Determined Spirits*; Kathryn Troy, *The Specter of the Indian: Race, Gender, and Ghosts in American Séances, 1848-1890* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2017); McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*.

[42] See Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019); Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Introduction: Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24, no. 1 (2009): 7–35, https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2008-013; and Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

purportedly neutral systems and via AI agents that ostensibly have no gender or race. I locate voice as a crucial site of these ambivalences, contradictions, and co-presences and navigate the ways that voice—in both séances and contemporary tech—signals present non-presences (Chapter 2), conjures bodies while affirming a dream of disembodiment (Chapter 3), and troubles indexical ties to a singular speaking subject (Chapter 4).

**1.2 Incredible voices**

The séance circles brought together in this dissertation—associated with the mediumship of Mina Stinson Crandon (who operated number the pseudonym Margery), William Cartheuser, Thomas Lacey, and the "group mediumship"[43] facilitated by T.G. Hamilton's circle[44] [45]—have been so selected because of the notable emphasis on voice in their practices, an orientation that became increasingly prominent from the late 19th century onwards in keeping with the development of modern acoustic technologies. As Steven Connor describes, by the early 20th century voice was considered "at once the most powerful and most versatile form of witness to the unseen."[46]

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[43] Letter from Lillian Hamilton to Mr. J.M. Bird, March 14, 1929, MSS 14, Box 15, Folder 14, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections.

[44] A thorough biography of each of these mediums is beyond the scope of this dissertation, as is a complete account of the archives produced by the séance circles formed around them. It bears noting, however, these practitioners were not only contemporaries but, in many cases, actively in dialogue—exchanging correspondence about their findings and travelling to meet with one another. William Cartheuser, for example, participated in séances at Margery's home in Boston, while Margery travelled to Winnipeg to sit with the Hamilton's circle. See E.E. Dudley, "Miscellaneous Episodes of Late 1926," *Proceedings for the American Society for Psychical Research* 20-21 (1933): 545-552; Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, "Margery in Winnipeg: Three séances of December 1926," *Proceedings for the American Society for Psychical Research* 20-21 (1933): 556-567.

[45] For a scholarly analysis of early 20th century séance practices that charts the connections between the Hamilton family circle in Winnipeg, Margery's circle in Boston, and William Cartheuser's circle in St. Catherines, see Robertson, *Science of the Séance.* For detailed discussions of the Hamilton family circle, see Serena Keshavjee (ed), *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2023); for Jenny O'Hara Pincock, whose home circle was led by Cartheuser, see Stanley McMullin, *Anatomy of a Séance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada, 1850-1950* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 164-180; for Lacey, see McMullin, *Anatomy of a* Séance, 196-214.

[46] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 222.

The versatility of voice in séance practices is marked by the different techniques and modalities for manifesting, amplifying, and assessing the veracity of spirit vocalizations. In addition to the aforementioned prevalence of trance speaking or "automatic" voice, early 20th century séances were also characterized by the emergence of a new category of voice phenomena known as "direct" or "independent" voice. Rather than spirits exerting control over the medium and using their vocal apparatus like an instrument, direct voices manifest independently from the body of the medium. Rather than a spectacle predicated on a ventriloquized speaking body, direct voice is characterized by voices sounding out around the séance room, often far from where the medium is seated. Direct voice also spurred numerous technical interventions, with practitioners investing in mass-produced Spiritualist paraphernalia, such as spirit trumpets, as well as building their own bespoke apparatuses to reveal the supernormal mechanics of disembodied spirit voicing, as will be discussed at length in Chapter 3. The séance therefore comprises an arena in which voice is always necessarily mediated, whether via the technology of the human medium or by increasingly elaborate and abstruse intermundane systems.

Spiritualists considered direct voice to be a particularly advanced and authoritative mode of spirit communication, posing considerable demand upon the psychic abilities of the medium while bypassing their bodily intervention. Practitioners also conceded that direct voice was among the most difficult modes of psychic phenomena to verify beyond suspicion. Indeed, famed paranormal investigator Hereward Carrington grouped Margery, Cartheuser, and Lacey together as mediums known for their advanced facility with direct voice, naming them as "three possible exceptions" to his general skepticism and denunciation of this type of phenomena.[47] As

[47] Carrington, *The World of Psychical Research*, (New York, NY: A.S. Barnes and Company Inc., 1973), 64.

J. Malcom Bird, a psychical researcher who conducted extensive tests into Margery's mediumship, further described:

> "… the idea of independent voice is wildly incredible when one first encounters it. From the standpoint of experience and common sense it is one of the hardest of all the physical phenomena of the séance room to divorce from prejudice, from the notion that in the nature of things it can't happen."[48]

I am fascinated by the entangled implications inherent to Bird's description of direct voice; to call such phenomena "wildly incredible" is suggest they are awe-inspiring, yet astonishing to the point of dubiousness. Voices in the séances room defy "common sense" insofar as they have no clear point of origin, no correlation to a vocalizing body or singular, self-contained subject; séance vocalities therefore revise dominant cultural imaginaries regarding what voices are understood to be and do, as discussed at length in Chapter 4.

Crucially, Bird was ultimately convinced of the genuineness of the incredible vocal phenomena that unfolded in Margery's séances. Moreover, he argued that such phenomena lent credence to the Spiritualist belief system more broadly: "if the independent voice were possible, anything was."[49] Incredible voices, therefore, serve a credibility-lending function. I argue that that this paradoxical construction of vocal incredibility is shared between séance practices and voices generated via machine learning. Direct voice mediumship, itself understood as a technical feat, affirms the veracity of spirit, just as voicing is held up as bellwether for the advancement of incredible tech. Indeed, voice plays a crucial role in numerous apocryphal origin stories regarding machine intelligence. The Mechanical Turk, an 18th century chess-playing automaton dubbed as a "thinking machine," was exhibited in tandem with a "speaking machine" that

[48] J. Malcolm Bird, "*Margery," The Medium* (Boston, MA: Small, Maynard & Co, 1925), 292.
[49] Bird, *Margery*, 302.

emulated a human vocal apparatus.[50] As Mladen Dolar describes, the speaking machine was crucial to sustaining the illusion, making the fraudulent automaton seem "plausible, acceptable, endowed with an air of credibility."[5152] Steve Jobs' famed insistence that the Macintosh computer say "hello" using a TTS generator during its debut demo in 1984[53] participates in the same techno-vocal imaginary which, I argue, also guides contemporary voice user interfaces: voice attests to the sophistication and smartness of technical systems, while mobilizing the aforementioned "human-ness" of voice to craft personable and inviting encounters with computational systems.

Incredible voices, in both séances and generative AI systems, simultaneously call up and call into question affiliations between voice and agency, presence, and authenticity. Even in these contexts, in which voices are mediated, harvested, concatenated, and generated via opaque technical systems, the cultural heft and intimate charge of voice endures. I attend to these strange endurances and recurrences, to the ways that vocal imaginaries are revised and to what ends: what do incredible voices lend credibility to and how?

### 1.4 Performing evidence, listening to listening

This dissertation enters the history of Spiritualism in the early 20th century—a moment when the movement's religious tenets were confronted by the scientific methods and tools espoused by psychical research. Psychical research advanced a more investigative approach to paranormal phenomena and, in this period, existed at the margins of mainstream science, wavering on the

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[50] Jessica Riskin, "The Defecating Duck, or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (2003): 617-622. https://doi.org/10.1086/377722.
[51] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 9.
[52] For a closer examination of this history and the ongoing function of voice in sustaining an illusion of machine intelligence, see Alex Borkowski, "Vocal Aesthetics, AI Imaginaries: Reconfiguring Smart Interfaces," *Afterimage* 50, no. 2 (June 1, 2023): 129–49. https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.2023.50.2.129.
[53] Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 170.

cusp of legitimacy.[54] Within this epistemic paradigm, séances were increasingly oriented towards applying tests and capturing measurable traces of spirit phenomena to prove their authenticity. The séance room became a laboratory in which investigators scrutinized the performances of mediums, often employing physical restraints and specially designed instruments in an attempt to detect fraudulent behaviours and verify genuine manifestations.

Researchers cited their empirical approach as means to distinguish themselves from the faith-based Spiritualist movement, thereby rebranding the pursuit of the paranormal as a respectable enterprise.[55] Hamilton, for example, declared he had "no patience" for Spiritualism,[56] preferring the "cold science" of psychical research.[57] The reorientation of séance practice away from parlour games, religious pursuits, or personal grief was described in highly gendered terms, with investigators denigrating such gatherings as the domain of "emotional and voluble ladies."[58] Psychical research was also predominantly pursued by upper-middle class men, intervening in the feminized arena of the séance and constraining the agency of mediums, often working class women, by subjecting them to rigorous and invasive tests.[59] As Peters describes, psychical research was oriented by an "aim of fending off the anarchy of the pop Spiritualism of the

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[54] Robertson, *Science of the Séance,* 8; Serena Keshavjee, "Introduction: Science and Sentiment in the Hamilton Family Fonds," in *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs*, ed. Serena Keshavjee (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2023), 7.

[55] Robertson, *Science of the Séance,* 16.

[56] Letter from Thomas Glendenning Hamilton to Mrs. J.A. Fisher, 7 April, 1933, MSS 14, Box 5, Folder 1, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections.

[57] Letter from Thomas Glendenning Hamilton to Mrs. J. Bonnizer, 16 January, 1931, MSS 14, Box 5, Folder 1, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections.

[58] Henry Clay McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With* (Baltimore, MD: The Williams & Wilkins Company, 1935), 29.

[59] Robertson, *Science of the Séance*, 15-16.

middle and lower classes and preserving a properly scientific hold on the super sensual universe."[60]

Experiments in psychical research were characterized by a conviction that the supernatural is nothing more than the as-yet undiscovered.[61] As Dr. Charles Richet, a Nobel prize winning physiologist and famed psychical researcher,[62] described: "the improbabilities of today are the elementary truths of tomorrow."[63] Researchers often situated their pursuits alongside those of other so-called great men of science whose discoveries faced rejection and ridicule in their own time. Galileo and his forced recantation of heliocentrism receives particularly prominent mention in numerous treatises on psychical research.[64] Such analogies speak to a desire among researchers to align their goals and methods with Enlightenment rationality, as well as emphasize the profundity of their discoveries as invaluable contributions to "the steady advancement of civilization."[65] Such declarations resonate with contemporary rhetoric from proponents of AI, who describe recent technical developments in revolutionary terms. Jeff Bezos, for example, offers up an analogy between AI and electricity in order to underscore the impact of its forthcoming ubiquitous integrations, describing AI as "a horizontal enabling layer. It can be used to improve everything. It will be in everything … I can guarantee you there isn't a

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[60] Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 101.
[61] Mark W. Richardson, Charles S. Hill, Alfred W. Martin, S. Ralph Harlow, Joseph De Wyckhoff, and L.R.G. Crandon, eds. *Margery, Harvard, Veritas: A Study in Psychics* (Boston, MA: Blanchard Printing Co., 1925), 8; Jenny O'Hara Pincock, *Trails of Truth* (Los Angeles, CA: The Austin Publishing Company, 1930), 12.
[62] It also bears noting that Richet was an active proponent of eugenics. See Elisa Camiscioli. *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
[63] Charles Richet, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research: Being a Treatise on Metaphysics*, trans. Stanley de Brath (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1923), 9.
[64] Bird, *Margery*, 3; Pincock, *Trails of Truth*, 15. Richardson et al., *Margery, Harvard, Veritas,* 4.; Richet, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, 8.
[65] Richardson et al., *Margery, Harvard, Veritas*, 3.

single application that you can think of that is not going to be made better by AI."[66] Bezos also notably invokes Galileo and his telescope that first made visible the moons of Jupiter in arguing that large language models (LLMs) are best understood not as inventions but as discoveries whose capabilities are constantly surprising and surpassing the expectations of their creators.[67] I therefore seek to tune into the resonances between the discursive framing of early 20th century séances, when public interest in the paranormal and the near-legitimacy of psychical research is cresting, and present-day AI hype. Then as now, while psychical researchers and tech CEOs deal in scientific certainties and advancements, faith remains at play. Their shared role is to evangelize about the irrefutability and inevitably of technological progress itself,[68] allaying doubts and cultivating belief among the broader public.

Given that the raison d'être of early 20th century séances might be understood as the production of irrefutable proofs, of cultivating credibility, documentation from these experiments is rich and plentiful. Meticulous textual, visual, and sonic records detailing procedures and outcomes from sittings today comprise eclectic, yet remarkably orderly, archival collections. Hand-written séance notes have been typed up into tidy minutes that not only transcribe the interlocutions between spirits and sitters, but record the date, time, location, names of the sitters, their placement in the circle, and other notable "conditions."[69] Other such documentation reveals the lengths that Spiritualists and psychical researchers went in order to assert the veracity of their

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[66] New York Times Events, "The Interview: From Amazon to Space—Jeff Bezos Talks Innovation, Progress and What's Next," YouTube, December 4, 2024, video, 1:06:09, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s71nJQqzYRQ.
[67] Lex Fridman, "Jeff Bezos: Amazon and Blue Origin | Lex Fridman Podcast #405," YouTube, December 14, 2023, video, 2:11:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcWqzZ3I2cY.
[68] Indeed, Amazon coined the term "technical evangelist" as a job title for members of its public relations team. See Scott Carey, "A Day in the Life of an AWS Technical Evangelist," Computerworld, December 12, 2018. https://www.computerworld.com/article/1656236/a-day-in-the-life-of-an-aws-technical-evangelist.html.
[69] Such conditions might include the presence of visitors or inexperienced sitters or whether the medium was afflicted with an illness that might impair their mediumistic abilities. See, for example, Pincock, *Trails of Truth*, 44-48.

findings. The Hamilton family fonds, for instance, contains a number of sworn and notarized affidavits in which sitters affirm their presence at a particular séance and the phenomena that they bore witness to.

The desire to generate compelling evidence also spurred practitioners to experiment with various recording technologies and to reorient séance proceedings with such outcomes in mind. As psychical researcher Harry Price describes, "the fact that our five normal sense are anything but infallible makes [it] imperative" to record experiments "by instrumental means."[70] Perhaps most famously, the use of cameras in the séance room produced some of the most widely-circulated documentation of early 20th century séances,[71] including Hamilton's archive of over 700 photographs now held at the University of Manitoba.[72] Indeed, advances in photographic technologies, such as magnesium flashes and rapid shutters, heightened popular understanding of the camera's sensitivity and objectivity, further espousing a belief among psychical researchers that the camera was uniquely capable of registering the fleeting and fragile materiality of spirit phenomena.[73] The use of transcription and audio technologies as a means to record spirit phenomena has received considerably less scholarly attention, but was nonetheless crucial to producing purportedly objective documentation. Published accounts of séance proceedings

[70] Harry Price, *Fifty Years of Psychical Research: A Critical Survey* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1939), 235.
[71] See Rosalind Krauss, "Tracing Nadar." *October* 5 (1978): 29-47, https://doi.org/10.2307/778643; Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theatre, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, Patrice Petro ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 42-71; Karl Schoonover, "Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography," *Art Journal* 62, no. 3 (2003): 30–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2003.10792168.
[72] See Keshavjee, "Introduction," 2.
[73] Schoonover, "Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography," 36.

describe the use of dictaphones and stenographers to create "official and binding" records.[74][75] Carrington also utilized phonographic recording in his investigations, devising tests using microphones in séances with both Cartheuser and Lacey and even holding sittings with the latter at a Toronto radio station in order to make use of the advanced audio equipment.[76] As discussed at length below, Lacey's circle later invested in a reel-to-reel tape recorder, producing 154 reels and over 300 hours of audio material.[77]

For all that Spiritualists and psychical researchers sought to implement scientific controls and reliable methods for gathering evidence, these attempts comprised oblique procedures for capturing phenomena that was in essence resistant to capture. Many of the necessary conditions for presencing spirit phenomena were hostile to actually being able to observe it. For example, ectoplasm, the energetic material that facilitated all manner of spirit phenomena (including voicing), was extremely fragile and would dissipate when exposed to light; the flash of a camera would immediately destroy the phenomena it sought to capture. Séances therefore transpired in darkness, compromising sitters' ability to visually assess the activities unfolding around them. Spiritualists also widely believed that mediums required favourable energetic conditions to conjure convincing manifestations of spirit, and therefore struggled to do so in the presence of doubting observers who contributed to "a hostile or uncongenial environment."[78]

Séance documentation is replete with justifications as to why proofs are not forthcoming, or why evidence might appear flawed or unconvincing. There is always an explanation as to why

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[74] Bird, *Margery*, 160.

[75] Treatises on psychical research occasionally making fleeting references to women who attended séances and supported their investigations by working as stenographers—yet another mode of feminized technical labour made invisible in the practice. See, for example, McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With*, 139.

[76] Carrington, *The World of Psychical Research*, 65.

[77] Erin MacIndoe Sproule and Rebecca Swabey, "The Ghost of Thomas Lacey," September 19, 2019, produced by Anthroscope Media, podcast, MP3 audio, 42:00, https://www.anthroscopemedia.com/theghostofthomaslacey.

[78] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, v.

photographs taken in the séance room reveal nothing out of the ordinary, why a spirit voice sounds nothing like that of the purported speaker when they were alive, or why a materialized spirit bore an uncanny resemblance to the medium. Spiritualist cosmology is constantly renegotiated in order to account for such imperfections, all while upholding the ultimate hypothesis in the survival of life after death. As Jill Galvan observes, the recourse to technical rhetoric to explain spirit phenomena, and to technology itself to record it, provides the alibi of a mechanical defect, allowing Spiritualists and investigators confronting dubious phenomena to pivot "away from ontological issues […] and towards issues of technological efficacy or competence."[79] It becomes possible to allay difficult questions regarding the existence of spirit by reorienting them towards issues of incompatibility between spiritual and terrestrial tech, explaining away lackluster results as glitches in transmission.

Spiritualist archives therefore comprise wildly incredible proofs, presenting a particularly salient opportunity for considering what makes for compelling evidence. Regardless of their veracity, such collections might be considered as parascientific reservoirs—home to theories and phenomena that, despite their relegation from mainstream science, nonetheless surround and suffuse it. Borrowing from Derek Lee's conceptualization of parascience—"the epistemic borderlands, a teritum quid between the scientific and non-scientific imaginaries where unorthodox ideas are perpetually reconceived, retheorized, and rejunivated through contact with a multiplicity of discourses"[80]—I attend to the liveliness of Spiritualist concepts and practices, in the moment of their making and in their reiterations in contemporary technoculture. My approach to discredited or dubious documentation is also informed by Jenny Rice's expanded

[79] Galvan, "The Victorian Post-Human," 84.
[80] Derek Lee, *Parascientific Revolutions: The Science and Culture of the Paranormal* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2025), 21.

definition of evidence, derived from her own research in collections of flawed or flimsy records. Rice returns to the etymological roots of the Latin *evidentia*, understood as a poetic or uncanny conjuring rather than static documentation or data.[81] Whereas evidence is often imbued with a "thingfulness,"[82] something a claim can possess in greater or lesser quantities, *evidentia* implies a making palpable, a process of bring forth for the senses. Rice thus advocates for such an enlarged sense of what evidence is doing, "that it is affectively and auratically figuring certain meanings for its users."[83]

I therefore approach Spiritualist archives in keeping with Rice's approach to the "multi-registered character of evidence," to the "*something more*" that exceeds the content of a given record.[84] Indeed, séance records produced through scientific procedure and the performance of rational enquiry are nonetheless saturated with the beliefs, investments, and desires of their makers, and therefore remain profoundly personal archives. Although addressed more or less explicitly, an undercurrent of grief is palpable in the documentation associated with all of the circles I examine in this dissertation. As much as psychical researchers sought to distance their pursuits from 19th century parlour séances associated with Victorian mourning culture, historians attribute the renewed uptick in these practices in the early 20th century to the mass death events of the first World War and the 1918 influenza pandemic.[85] The material outputs from séances were therefore meaningful not only as confirmation of a broader hypothesis regarding the survival of personality after death, but as a curative for the grief of the those participating in the

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[81] Jenny Rice, *Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2020), 7-8.
[82] Rice, *Awful Archives*, 4.
[83] Rice, *Awful Archives*, 15.
[84] Rice, *Awful Archives*, 12.
[85] Esyllt W. Jones, "Ghostly Pandemics: Speaking to the Dead in the Hamilton Family," in *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs*, Serena Keshavjee ed. (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2023), 23-40; Massicotte, *Trance Speakers,* 34.

experiment. Beyond their veracity or validity, these are traces that move. To borrow for Ann Cvetkovich, such archives comprise "repositories for feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception."[86] I therefore proceed without aiming to debunk these admittedly dubious, often heartbreaking, and occasionally hilarious records, but rather attend to the affects and afterlives they conjure in addition to the phenomena they describe.

While I seek to attend to the varied registers, investments, and potentials embedded in all the records I encounter, I want to touch in particular on how this attention takes shape with regard to sound archives that document séances procedures and phenomena. Indeed, an expansive collection of audio recordings produced by Lacey's circle comprises a focal and distinctive archival source in this dissertation, which has, to date, received minimal scholarly attention. While textual records from this long-running circle begin in 1924, the group later used a tape recorder to document their sittings between 1960 and 1966. Such recordings align with "a wave of spiritualist sound experimentation" that unfolded in the 1960s and 1970s afforded by the widespread availability of tape recording, which was relatively inexpensive and provided greater potential for amplifying more subtle sonic phenomena.[87] Because of the longevity of Lacey's circle, the formal components of the séance—music and prayer at the beginning of the sitting, the sequential presencing of numerous speaking spirits, and the use of spirit trumpets to support direct voice mediumship—align with textual records produced decades earlier. While Lacey's use of tape recording might certainly be understood in dialogue with mid-century preoccupations

[86] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.
[87] Enns, "Voices of the Dead," 21.

in parapsychology such as electronic voice phenomena (EVP),[88] they are also anachronistic in their commitment to a mode of mediumship and ritual that had waned in popularity over the past three decades.

My research has comprised listening to about a tenth of the Lacey collection. The original reels have been digitized, and my encounters with the recordings have therefore been mobile and disbursed. Rather than a contained and dedicated listening in the archive room to the audio in its original format, I engage with the séances as MP3 files stored on my laptop, returning to them repeatedly over the course of nearly two years. My listening notes, scattered across several notebooks and marked with frayed orange sticky notes, indicate moments wherein I sought to access, in whatever imperfect capacity, the sensory ritual of the séance. It is tempting to describe this process, listening to the voice of those who are now long dead as they too listen to the voices of the dead, as a séance-like encounter itself. Indeed historians, such as Arlette Farge, often evoke necromantic metaphors to describe their experiences conducting research in archives: "the naïve but profound feeling of tearing away a veil, of crossing through the opaqueness …" in order to "find not only the inaccessible but also the living."[89]

I am, however, wary of romanticizing listening to these archives as a means of cultivating a more intimate understanding of séance proceedings or a closer connection to the people participating in them, and by doing so, reaffirming the couplings of voice with personhood, intimacy, and authenticity that I seek to question, and indeed that both séances and AI voices simultaneously rely upon and make strange. I am equally reticent to elevate or aggrandize

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[88] For more on EVPs, see Enns, "Voices of the Dead," 21-26; Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 85-91. See also Interchapter C.

[89] Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives,* trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 8.

listening as a sensory modality that de facto yields more immersive, embodied, and affective encounters,[90] and therefore operates "in resistance to hierarchical and objectifying ways of moving through the world organized by ocularcentrism."[91] On the contrary, I show that séances comprise cultural sites structured not only around the affective power of sound and voice, but in which listening is oriented in service of reason and classification, often in profoundly hierarchical ways. As an investigative discipline, psychical research involves gathering, scrutinizing, and interpreting minute details in order to assess the veracity, or fraudulence, of paranormal phenomena,[92] such that listening also becomes an instrument of detection, interrogation, and data collection.

My approach to sound archives is informed by theoretical perspectives that understand listening in terms of orientation: perceptual habits are both guided by positionality and can be modulated differently—towards and away from objects and tendencies, fixations can become unfixed.[93] I therefore seek to activate several listening strategies in order to attend to power dynamics at work in the recordings. Firstly, I consider Nina Sun Eidsheim's call for a practice of "listening to listening:" a technique that "reorients the researcher" in keeping with a conviction that "to know voice we must examine the listening practices that structure voice."[94] As I discuss at length in Chapters 3 and 4, listening in the séance dramatizes what Eidsheim calls the acousmatic question—"who is this?"[95]—as participants attempt to discern the identity of visiting

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[90] Sterne, *The Audible Past,*15.
[91] Stephanie Loveless, "Tactical Soundwalking in the City: A Feminist Turn from Eye to Ear," *Leonardo Music Journal* 30 (2020): 100. https://doi.org/10.1162/lmj_a_01100.

[92] Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 190.
[93] See Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 37-40; Nathan Snaza, *Tendings: Feminist Esoterisms and the Abolition of Man* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024), 84-87.
[94] Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 27-28.
[95] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 1.

spirits based on the presumed legibility of the voice as an indicator of gender, age, race, and ethnicity. Indeed, this question arises each time a distinct spirit materializes in the darkened séance room—an environment in which listening is regarded as a uniquely reliable and objective mode of perception.[96] Listening to listening makes plain the ways that sitters correlate vocal traits, such as pitch, timbre, and accent, to physical characteristics—even in a scenario in which the voice under scrutiny is necessarily disembodied. Beyond the content of spirit speech, I endeavour to listen not only for the audible properties of spirit voices, but to ways that such properties are appraised, evaluated, and assigned meaning in the moment of their reception in the séance room—often in keeping with gendered, racial, and colonial hierarchies.

Secondly, I seek to emulate what Annette Hoffman describes as a "close listening" approach to sound archives: an "attempt to grasp … *everything* one can hear on a recording,"[97] particularly sounds that may not be described in accompanying written documentation, in order to access the way that recordings "at times speak in ways that are contrapuntal to the object status attributed to them by the recordists and in archival documentation."[98] While archival descriptions for each reel list the names of the spirits who appear in the recording and a brief summary of the message they bear, close listening reveals sonic details that suggest that such intermundane transmissions are far more glitchy than the descriptions imply. The accents and pitch shifts that distinguish spirit voices from one another, the exclamations, laughter, and hushed commentary from sitters, and the sounds of levitating objects crashing to the floor make palpable the strangeness and silliness often expurgated from textual records. Furthermore, given the circle's investment in audio recording as a means to produce proofs beyond question, close

[96] Robertson, *Science of the Séance,* 92.
[97] Anette Hoffman, "Introduction: Listening to Sound Archives," *Social Dynamics* 41, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 75. https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2014.983314.
[98] Hoffman, "Introduction," 75.

listening provides a means to think critically about the status of such evidence by attending to sounds that register the process of recording itself. The audible clicking on and off of the tape recorder, for instance, indicate breaks in the real-time temporal flow of the recording, making audible the manipulability of tape despite the promised fly on the wall fidelity that the circle invokes in creating such records.

Thirdly, I seek to cultivate an approach that figures the relationship between listening and knowing differently from the researchers to whose recordings, and listening, I am listening. Indeed, in handling archival audio as evidence in producing a scholarly output, I have inevitably found myself listening with the aim of extracting a perfect quotation or discerning and diagnosing some novel yet certain truth from the content of the recordings. Dylan Robinson, in his work on decolonial approaches to sound and music, proposes that working towards what he terms a "critical listening positionality" requires not only acknowledging one's perceptual privileges and habits, but "dislocating the fixity and goal-oriented teleology of listening with more flexible listening practices"[99] that are "not predicated on use-value or the drive to accumulate knowledge."[100] In order to cultivate such an approach in practice, I find Erin Manning's distinction between method and technique helpful. For Manning, method acts as "an apparatus of capture"[101]—a means of "making-reasonable,"[102] of surveying and categorizing experience into pre-sanctioned and static categories in order to "safeguard against the ineffable."[103] Technique, in contrast, comprises repeated action—such as close reading or daily practice—that makes it possible to attune to the "more-than" of that practice, to "the experience

[99] Robinson, *Hungry Listening,* 58.
[100] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 70.
[101] Erin Manning, "Against Method," in *Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-Envisioning Research*, ed. Phillip Vannini (London: Routledge, 2015), 57.
[102] Manning, "Against Method," 56.
[103] Manning, "Against Method," 58.

of the work's opening itself to its excess."[104] I endeavor to practice listening in keeping with this understanding of technique—repeatedly and intentionally, remaining open to the ineffable and the incoherent such that answers are not foreclosed by the terms of the question.

I wish to acknowledge the specificity of encountering séance practices through audio archives and make space for the fluctuating techniques and knowledges that emerge through repeated listening. I therefore seek to render this process, comprising oscillating registers of attention and orientations, in the interchapters situated throughout this dissertation, which take the form of annotated séance transcripts. In these annotated transcripts, I stay with questions opened up through "the rhythm, the cadence, the intensity" of the recordings; with the "thought-feeling [that] escapes existing forms of knowledge."[105] Moreover, I explore the incommensurability between voicing in the séance—a process of shifting, overlapping, and undefined agencies—and attempts to fix and define spirit voices in textual records. Indeed, the séance constructs vocalities that escape order and trouble certainty-seeking listening strategies.

This incoherence plays out, I believe, in interesting ways in the transcripts, which were created using automated speech recognition (ASR) available through Microsoft 365. While not precisely the same software that I've utilized here, ASR is also integral to the speech processing systems that in part make up Alexa and other voice assistants' conversational abilities.[106] Although this transcription feature comprises an extremely quotidian (and low quality) application of AI, working with basic ASR software adds additional complexity to what

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[104] Erin Manning, "Ten Proposals for Research Creation," in *Collaboration in Performance Practice: Premises, Workings and Failures*, eds. Noyale Colin and Stefanie Sachsenmaier (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 136.
[105] Manning, "Against Method," 64.
[106] Simone Natale, *Deceitful Media: Artificial Intelligence and Social Life after the Turing Test* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 109-110.

Manning calls the shifting "writer-keyboard-book ecology"[107] of academic thought. While I have made substantial corrections and edits to the transcripts for clarity and length, the interchapters make palpable the ecology from which they emerge by retaining ASR errors, which emerge from the algorithmic imperative to capture, recognize, and make sense even of phenomena that exceed its analytic parameters. These mishearings and misattributions can yield unexpected insights. My own annotations also seek to explore what ASR generated transcripts fail to capture, what is sanitized in the name of legibility. This process also makes use of the strangeness of the audio files—the incredible voices with fraught relationships to embodied speakers they contain—as test cases that reveal assumptions embedded in ASR's functionality regarding what voices are and what they reliably index.

**1.4 Affinities, resonances, and transhistorical folds**

Further to the reciprocal relationships between séance practices and emerging communication technologies in the 19th and early 20th centuries, several scholars have also posited that Spiritualist concepts retain influence beyond the movement's cultural peak, and indeed remain operative in the ways that computational media is conceptualized. Galvan argues that the ways that séances figure human bodies as technical receivers and distinguish between immaterial information and the physical apparatuses that support its transfer anticipates logics and imaginaries associated with cybernetics and post-humanism.[108] Anthony Enns similarly suggests that the influence of Spiritualist concepts remains discernible in information theory and AI research, observing that the Turing test shares with séances "the common premise that human personality can be identified and authenticated on the basis of information transmission rather

[107] Manning, "Against Method," 64.
[108] Galvan, "The Victorian Post-Human," 80.

than bodily presence."[109] Enns further argues that the concept of cyberspace—"digital universes populated by virtual avatars and artificial intelligences"[110]—marks the ultimate realization of the merged imaginaries of Spiritualism and modern computing.[111]

This mode of enquiry is not predicated upon crafting a narrative of linear technological development, sequential cause and effect, or concrete influence or inheritance. Peters, who also looks to modern Spiritualism to illuminate "virtual reality, cloning, cyborgs, and […] global ethernets" that comprise the contemporary technological milieu, articulates an approach for making the present intelligible by aligning it with moments in the past "with which it has a secret affinity."[112] Following Walter Benjamin,[113] Peters suggests that "history works not in a solely linear way but by being arranged into various constellations."[114] Even historical events or theories whose role in shaping the present might be difficult to concretely demonstrate can nonetheless be "good to think with" insofar as "they lay out arguments and concerns that in current thinking are often muffled at best."[115] The act of constellating the past and present on the basis of secret affinities is one which I emulate here, as I seek to craft bi-directional insights regarding both Spiritualist practices and present-day tech.

I also believe Peters' approach might be further honed and specified in this context by thinking about affinity as a form of resonance. Indeed, affinity is not reducible merely to

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[109] Anthony Enns, "Information Theory of the Soul: Spiritualism, Technology, and Science Fiction," in *Believing in Bits: Digital Media and the Supernatural*, eds. Simone Natale and D.W. Pasulka, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 40.
[110] Enns, "Information Theory of the Soul," 38.
[111] Enns, "Information Theory of the Soul," 42.
[112] Peters, *Speaking Into the Air*, 3.
[113] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1968), 253–64.
[114] Peters, *Speaking Into the Air*, 3.
[115] Peters, *Speaking Into the Air*, 4.

similarity but rather describes a relation, often characterized by attraction or inclination. While resemblance might form the common ground for such a connection, there is also an affective dimension to affinity. A liking for as well as likeness, affinity emerges as a kind of intensity that draws entities together. Julie Beth Napolin describes resonance in similar terms: a "sympathetic vibration" in which one system acts upon another, resonance is "defined by relating."[116] In the context of her own literary scholarship, Napolin suggests that resonance provides the fundamental ground for comparing passages of text to one another: "we say that passage or works 'resonate' when the reasons for their return or hold on us and on each other are difficult to demonstrate."[117] Resonance therefore names "the affective substance of that experience" for which scholars otherwise lack a critical vocabulary.[118] Throughout this dissertation, I hold séances and smart tech in resonance with one another—creating pairings predicated on varied forms of sympathy, rather than causality. Each chapter binds and unbinds the past and present, drawing Spiritualist practices and cosmologies together with voice user interface and machine learning, and attending to the consonant and dissonant vibrations that emerge between them. The discussion of artworks interwoven throughout this dissertation act as additional resonators—a means to set relations in motion and amplify affinities between what might at times feel like incongruous objects of study.

I further advance an approach rooted in resonance rather than analogy; if the former pursues clarity through inference and simplification, the latter creates an opening for acknowledging and maintaining obscurities and dissonances. There are indeed numerous

[116] Julie Beth Napolin, *The Fact of Resonance: Modernist Acoustics and Narrative Form* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020), 3-4.
[117] Napolin, *The Fact of Resonance*, 7.
[118] Napolin, *The Fact of Resonance*, 7.

asymmetries between séance practices and smart tech; one logic cannot be completely and coherently mapped onto the other. This asymmetry is registered in my differing approaches to these varied strands within my research. I have felt a different sense of obligation towards the communities of Spiritualists whose archives I engage, and indeed extend a kind of care and tenderness towards them that I do not extend to Alexa and the AI hype adjacent to it. Despite the prevalence of fraud and manipulation among mediums, such that the séance might be interpreted as an extractive exercise, the intimate dynamics within these individual communities of practices are more varied than the power relations between tech giants such as Amazon and their customers.[119] I handle such relations differently because they are, indeed, very different.

I want to suggest that foregrounding transhistorical resonance as a critical mode also emulates séance practices themselves, which enact a kind of irreverence towards linear time. As a ritual that operates not merely in defiance of death but in keeping with a conviction that "there are no dead,"[120] séances refuse to regard the past as over and done with. The incredible phenomena that unfold in séances attests to the contemporaneous-ness and live-ness of the spirit world and to the ongoing mutual ties and filial bonds across permeable cosmic registers. In this regard, the chapters in this dissertation act something like séances—creating a critical architecture for the co-presence of the past and the present.

I argue that this approach is uniquely well-suited to thinking not only about digital media and information theory, as discussed above, but about the particular operations of machine learning and the AI exuberance that accompanies them. We find ourselves in untimely times.

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[119] Future research that considers intimate bonds between users and AI personae, or grief tech applications that generate synthetic likenesses of lost loved ones, might seek to extend a more sympathetic approach to these relationships.

[120] Pincock, *Trails of Truth*, 12.

Promised innovations in AI are made to seem plausible and inevitable by repeating long-established visions of technofutures, with smart tech continuing to rehearse and reify normative ideals regarding gendered labour and domesticity. [121] Amazon's claim that "the future is voice"[122] and it's parallel resurfacing of familiar necro-vocal fictions to signal that future also registers this untimeliness, and indeed must be regarded within a broader program of advancing a future predicated on long-established power relations. Moreover, the forward-looking thrust of these recycled discourses glosses over the temporal operations of machine learning and predictive modeling as such. Insofar as algorithmic systems can only predict futures based on the historical data used to train them, they comprise, according to Katherine McKittrick, "future-making mathematical equations" in which the answer comes before the question: "anticipatory computations that tell us what we already know, but in the future."[123] If big data instantiate "archival folds" that collapse the future into the past,[124] it is not only apt to study such systems through a transhistorical lens but to specifically excavate histories that likewise suspend linear distinctions in time.

It is out of a desire to step back from the frontier of the so-called AI revolution, to examine what is lost or overlooked in its advancement, that I enact these archival folds and affinities—echoing the structures of the systems I interrogate. Dwelling with these temporal collapses and sympathetic resonances can, I believe, comprise as a critical gesture; a fold needn't necessarily result in foreclosure. As McGarry describes, Spiritualism "refused the idea of the

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[121] Sun-ha Hong, "Technofutures in Stasis: Smart Machines, Ubiquitous Computing, and the Future That Keeps Coming Back," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (April 13, 2021): 1940-41.
[122] Alexa Developers, "Mark Cuban: Voice, Ambient Computing are the Future and Why Developers Should Get in Now."
[123] Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 116.
[124] Daniela Agostinho, Catherine D'Ignazio, Annie Ring, Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, and Kristin Veel, "Uncertain Archives: Approaching the Unknowns, Errors, and Vulnerabilities of Big Data through Cultural Theories of the Archive," *Surveillance & Society* 17, no. 3/4 (September 7, 2019): 426.

past as irretrievable and the future as the inevitable result of calcified socio-political structures."[125] So too, I seek to refuse easy outputs, conclusions, or certitudes—instead, bringing the past into proximity with present to generate resonances that amplify, trouble, and exceed dominant techno-imaginaries.

### 1.5 Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2 explores the affinities between séances and voice user interfaces insofar as they both comprise domestic technologies. I examine how they make use of, and enact changes to, the home—both in its physical architecture and as a cultural form. Thinking with Lauren Berlant's conceptualization of "institutions of intimacy,"[126] I examine the ways that both Spiritualist and contemporary smart tech mobilize, re-inforce, and revise social divisions between public and private, gendered forms of labour, and marked and unmarked personhoods. Through an analysis of *LAUREN* (2017-) a series of performances by contemporary media artist Lauren Lee McCarthy, I aim to catalyze further resonances between the modes of visibility and invisibility, attention and inattention that accompany the spectacle of domestic technologies. Indeed, the success of both voice user interfaces and spirit mediums is measured by their indiscernibility, the degree to which their mediating function goes unnoticed. Such performances, I argue, hinge on femininity and whiteness as attributes suited to disappearing.

The role of voice in constructing present non-presences is taken up in Chapter 3, which explores the persistence of, and preoccupation with, bodies in scenarios structured around "disembodied" voices. Drawing on Connor's research into direct voice practices, I pick up on the dream of "untouched sound"[127]—the diminishment of haptic or bodily interference in the

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[125] McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past,* 14.
[126] Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 281.
[127] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 215.

production of voices—as an imaginary that remains palpable in voice user interfaces. I argue, however, that disembodiment still requires bodies, and that voices (even and especially incredible ones) always necessarily conjure the idea of a body in order to be understood as voices. Alexa, for example, despite Amazon's claim that it has no physical body, relies on labouring bodies to ensure its functioning and on a projection of body-ness to cultivate meaningful interactions with its users. In this chapter, I focus firstly on the ways that investigations into direct voice mediumship construct disembodiment by engaging mediums and sitters in taxing bodily exercises and through the use of bespoke "voice machines." Secondly, I examine the ways that listening is instrumentalized in séances as a means to discern physical traits, specifically signifiers of race, even in disembodied voices.

Chapter 4 considers whether the incredibility of spirit and AI voices situates them outside what is generally contained within the category of voice—what does it mean to call these anomalous sonic phenomena voices (or not)? To support this discussion, I explore the concept of vocality, which has been defined and utilized in varied ways across academic literature to think more expansively about voices. Beyond embodied, semantic utterance, vocality encompasses social practices, intersubjective ecologies, and technical actors, thereby intervening in the seemingly indelible coupling of voice with the human. In the context of séances, vocality is a useful term for unpacking the convoluted functionality of ectoplasm—a supernatural "semi-material" [128]—in producing spirit voices. Moreover, Spiritualists' preoccupation with visually capturing ectoplasm, despite its resistance to capture, resonates with the ways the AI systems are also unfathomable, impossible to render or make legible at a human scale (as demonstrated in Kate Crawford and Vladen Joler's artwork *Anatomy of an AI System* (2018)). In this regard, both

[128] Bird, *Margery,* 171.

ectoplasmic voices and voice user interfaces might be understood as aesthetic objects insofar as they aim to articulate inarticulable structures. The unknowability of such vocal ecologies is contrasted with the certitude with which AI systems make knowledge claims regarding the voices of their users, the stakes of which I explore in detail.

**Note:**

Text in the left-hand column, aligned left is transcribed from audio recordings held in the Thomas Lacey séance collection at the University of Waterloo.

Text in the right-hand column, aligned left records my questions, observations, and reflections.

*Text in italics, aligned right indicates exclamations, overlapping speech, and extra-linguistic sounds and utterances.*

Text in sans serif font, aligned right indicates errors made by the automated speech recognition (ASR) software used to create the transcripts.

Figure 1: Otto Smith in his home at 362 Frederick Street in Kitchener, Ontario, in 1964, where séances with Thomas Lacey were held. Recording equipment is visible on the right side of the room. Photo courtesy of University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections & Archives.

**INTERCHAPTER A) – to hear your voice, to hold it**

00:00:05
Otto Smith: This is Wednesday evening, September 23rd, 1964. We are about to have another séance at the home of Otto Smith, 362 Frederick St. Kitchener, Ontario. This is visiting night, and we invite our spirit friends and loved ones to spend the evening with us, which we trust will be to our mutual benefit. The meeting will be under the supervision of Amirah, our great teacher from the higher spheres. The medium is Mr. Thomas Lacey and the usual sitters are present.[1]

*tape recorder audibly sputters on; Otto Smith clears his throat. tape crackle audible throughout the entire recording.*

I've come to recognize Smith's voice—his measured cadence, his distinctive pronunciation of the word "see-ance," his careful enunciation of the year "nineteen hundred and sixty-four"—as that which always delivers the "acoustic tag"[2] situated at the beginning of nearly all of the séance recordings in this collection. These introductory announcements provide verbal metadata, akin to the descriptors that appear at the top of séance reports and transcripts, and thus ensure the identifiability of the recording in the event that supporting documentation might be lost. The consistent presence of the tags makes plain the archivist impulse of Lacey's circle, anticipating the longevity of the recordings beyond the lifespan of their creators. In their reliable repetition, unwavering form, and steady delivery, these announcements feel to me like incantations willing the recordings' posterity.

An unknown speaker is momentarily heard in the background before the tape cuts; recording resumes.

00:00:50
Organ music

Smith is playing an electric Hammond organ, situated in his living room alongside

[1] Reel 67, 23 September 1964, SCA258-GA270-107b, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.

[2] Hoffman, "Introduction: Listening to Sound Archives,"75.

00:01:12
Hymn: “Beautiful Garden of Prayer”

*There’s a garden where Jesus is waiting,*
*There’s a place that is wondrously fair;*
*For it glows with the light of His presence,*
*’Tis that beautiful garden of prayer.*

*Oh, the beautiful garden,*
*the garden of prayer,*
*Oh, the beautiful garden of prayer;*
*There my Savior awaits,*
*and He opens the gates*
*To the beautiful garden of prayer.*

*There’s a garden where Jesus is waiting,*
*And I go with my burden and care*
*Just to learn from His lips words of comfort,*
*In the beautiful garden of prayer.*

*Oh, the beautiful garden,*
*the garden of prayer,*
*Oh, the beautiful garden of prayer;*
*There my Savior awaits,*
*and He opens the gates*
*To the beautiful garden of prayer*

a reel-to-a reel tape recorder, turntable, and stereo system [Figure 1]. The sound is familiar, recalling the organ I used to tinker with at my deeply religious great aunt’s house. The melody follows a familiar hymnal chord progression, an easy and predictable resolution. I think of the sitters listening to the music in darkness, waiting and awash in the warbling melody. I feel compelled to close my eyes. The presence of music at the beginning of the séance is functional; Spiritualists explain its necessity as a means to generate the appropriate energies for the production of clear and convincing spirit phenomena. On a more experiential level, however, I find that the music works to delineate and enframe the ritual. The organ creates a kind of auditory buffer, a period of easing out of the world of living and entering the intermundane container of the séance. It both signals and affords the suspension of particular widely-held certainties and the possibility of otherwise modes of communing.

A mezzo-soprano soloist, practiced and professional. This doesn’t sound to me like someone singing within the séance room. I wonder if Smith is playing along with a recording in real time while the sitters listen, or if this entire musical interlude has been spliced into the tape for the benefit of future listeners. If the former, what difference does it make to the technology of the séance itself if the singing is recorded? Does is operate the same way? Is this as efficacious a generator of psychic vibration as live performance? As a means to sow gardens and open gates? If the latter, what does this mean for the status of the recording as evidence and artefact? If the music is not located in the séance and does not contribute to its realization, is the performativity of the musical performance diluted? What does the recording want from me as a distant-future listener?

*tape cut*

00:03:47
Lacey-Walter: Lead us into those vast realms of thought which are emanating from the minds of the masters of all time and grant us world-wide peace.

A problem arises immediately with regard to naming and attributing spirit voices in transcripts. Reports created by Thomas Lacey's circle provide only the name of the spirit, whereas transcripts created by the UWaterloo archives attribute all spirit voices to Lacey. The logic of the séance suggests that Lacey's voice is never heard at all. Although the medium is necessary for the séance to function, the voices that materialize over the course of the sitting are in no way proper to him. ASR attempts to discern between different voices, allocating each distinct voice a number (Speaker 1, Speaker 2 etc.). The need to locate voices as embodied aural productions of a particular person is ill-fitting to sonic phenomena that unfold in séances. I have settled for this hyphenated naming convention to signal, and stay with, this attributional quandary.

Walter is a reoccurring presence in Lacey's séances. He is Lacey's brother, who died in childhood.[3] Walter acts as the door-keeper, overseeing and maintaining order among the other spirits who come through. This voice is clear and fluent, with the inflection of a Derbyshire accent. I take Lacey-Walter's voice as an indication of what Lacey's never-heard voice might sound like.

00:04:10
Lacey-Amirah: Greetings, my fellow travelers, greetings.

00:04:10 Speaker 2
Dry teens, my fellow travelers …

[3] Nick Richbell, "Men in the 20th Century Séance Room" (presentation, UAAC-AAUC conference, University of Toronto, 29 October 2022).

Amirah, the circle's spiritual leader hailing from ancient Egypt[4], is distinguished by a deep voice, speaking slowly and deliberately, often placing long pauses within sentences and between syllables: "Gree—tings," hence ASR's mishearing "dry teens." Lacey-Amirah's voice possesses a heavy, yet non-specific accent.

Sitters: Greetings.

ASR struggles to render the voices of the sitters as they respond collectively to the spirits who are situated as focal speakers. In moments of overlapping or unclear utterance, ASR hallucinates phantom speakers and speech as it attempts to make sense of difficult to decipher sounds.

Transcription more generally necessitates that overlapping utterances and reactions audible throughout the recording are condensed or expurgated as noisy intrusions that otherwise muddy the record. Of course, the sitters never speak in perfect unison, but form a chorus of varied exclamations that bubble up around those of the spirits. Although the precise content of such utterances is often indecipherable, I find the affirming murmurs, soft chuckles, and whispered remarks to be crucial to the sonic makeup of the séance—a mark of its sociability, a reminder that sitters are not merely recipients of a message but form an active and convivial collective.

Lacey-Amirah: Once again I cross the threshold of consciousness and our temple, and find myself seated here amongst you, where already you have many visitors,

[4] Richbell, "Men in the 20th Century Séance Room."

which I will welcome without wasting very much time that they may speak with you. It is good to see so many who are present here this night. And now I shall dwell in the silence, and yet be with you. Salam for now.

Sitters: Salam.

[...]

Lacey-Nelda Smith's voice is creaky and higher in pitch than those heard to this point in the séance. A Derbyshire accent remains audible in her speech.

00:10:30
Lacey-Nelda Smith: Yes, it's umm … I know you didn't expect me to come tonight. I know that.

Otto Smith: (inaudible) … we expected you?

Lacey-Nelda Smith: No, you did not.

Otto Smith: (inaudible) … and who is speaking now?

Lacey-Nelda Smith: Well, who do you think? I've been promoted. I am now … I am now the chief director of rescue now.

"Rescue" refers to a practice undertaken by Lacey's circle in collaboration with their spirit colleagues in order to guide recently deceased spirits, who are disoriented and distressed in the wake of their own bodily deaths.[5]

Otto Smith: Oh, that's mother! It's Nelda.

*hello! oh sure! hello mother! congratulations! goodness!*

Lacey-Nelda Smith: I'm coming just to cheer you all up. You've all been in the dumps, every one of you. I don't know why. Just because I didn't come last time? I was busy.

00:11:12 Speaker 6
I don't know what was.
00:11:13 Speaker 2
I don't think it.

Otto Smith: Well, we were looking for you!

*yes, yes …*

[5] Richbell, "Men in the 20th Century Séance Room."

Lacey-Nelda Smith: Well, I was busy and I know I'll be busy now for some time, but I'll always try to get through. I'll always try to get through and keep some balance here. You must remember now, Evangeline …

*sure, mmhmm, that's right ...*

Evangline: Yes?

00:11:54 Speaker 7
Parents
00:12:00 Speaker 9
Flash
00:12:00 Speaker 7
Cancel

Lacey-Nelda Smith: I'm away from here, I'm away from earth's consciousness now and it just is that I … I wanted to see everything right, come right and everything. And I think … I think it is.

Evangeline: Sure.

Lacey-Nelda Smith: Yes, I … I've given much thought to it and here we are all together at different consciousness, different purpose and everything. And our only concern at all times, as I have said, is that you who are yet behind here should be happy and contented. And I … I want to see this. I shall … I shall look for this when I when I come. But I did want to tell you tonight that they have promoted me to the chief director of rescue. Yes, thank you. And we shall carry on, we shall carry on with vigor now. And when it is the night for rescue, we have quite a few all ready to come in and get this enlightenment. And when I look around, as I am able to do now, I see it from many faces. There is a turbulence in the in the world, isn't there? And very much violence. And that ... that then emphasizes the rescue, because of the violence and suddenness of so many people passing over here. And so we have a lot of work to do. There's one here can tell you all about it. Well, my blessings. Goodnight.

*sure, yes, thank you, that's wonderful, just come as much as you can ...*

00:12:47 Speaker 7
When I was on the phone.

*that's wonderful! congratulations!*

*mmmhmm*
*yes, yes indeed, yes, very much so*
*yes*

*thank you! come again! goodnight!*

In such exchanges, it's palpable to me the degree to which Lacey's circle understands their mission as a benevolent one—not only advancing their own enlightenment or fulfilling a desire to commune with deceased loved ones, but serving human-kind by establishing connection and collaboration between the worlds of the living and the dead. Séances are framed as work, as vocation. Spirits often come through to provide encouragement, affirming that the sitters' efforts are valuable and significant. The séance acts a ritual to soothe not only personal grief but helplessness in difficult times.

00:14:13
Lacey-Mrs. Schmieder: Yes, I've come with Nelda. Hello, Garnet.

*Four seconds of silence pass before the next spirit begins speaking*

Garnet: Oh mother!

Lacey-Mrs. Schmieder: No, no this is … your mother is here, all right.

Garnet: No? I didn't think it was mother's voice, but I thought when you said …

Lacey-Mrs. Schmieder: No, no, your mother is here …

Garnet: And who are you?

Lacey-Mrs. Schmieder: I'm Mrs. Schmieder. Yes, I … I thought it was my turn to come tonight and what Nelda was speaking about is quite true. I mean, we have to do

Lacey-Mrs. Schmieder is indistinguishable to me from the previous spirit—a voice pitched up in order to denote femininity, the same trace of a Derbyshire accent. I go back and listen several times to this transition, listening for characteristics that might differentiate these spirits but draw a blank. ASR also labels these two voices as belonging to the same speaker.

Evidently, I am not alone in struggling to identify or distinguish this voice. Such mishearings and misattributions are common in séance recordings, with sitters often back-peddling their guesses.

*oh good! wonderful! how nice to have you …*

something about this and we're doing it. We're capable of doing it. Do you know that we're doing more in this little group of people here than we can see anywhere in the whole world? And other people are doing the same thing we're trying to do. They're meeting with partial success and it all helps you know. Yes. That's you, isn't it? Evangeline?

Evangeline: Yes, it certainly is. I'm so happy to hear your voice.

Curious that a voice can be so good to hear when it isn't familiar or immediately recognizable. The affective power of the voice somehow remains undiluted, even as an unconvincing likeness.

Otto Smith: We are very pleased, Mrs. Schmider, with this meeting and you made such wonderful progress into … [inaudible]

Lacey-Mrs. Schmieder: Yes, we have. And you, you have ample record of it.

Otto Smith: Yes, we sure have.

The spirits are very well-aware that they are being recorded, and often express enthusiasm about this endeavor. Indeed, Smith and the circle record the séances at the urging of the spirits, awaiting their guidance regarding the opportune moment to publish them. Later in this séance, the spirit of Garnet's mother advises that "an appropriate time" is forthcoming and the group "must have patience to wait until that time so that they can do the most good."

Lacey-Mrs. Schmieder: And they'll certainly be a lot more. Now this has … we want you to carry this on with some vigor. Because it will be some time before the world gets rested a bit, but eventually it will come. Yes, it will. I know our forces are very … they are very strong here. It is a

00:15:45 Speaker 4
Fine.
00:15:47 Speaker 6
I'm done.
00:15:47 Speaker 6
Weight.

00:16:27 Speaker 4
It is a struggle.

struggle, isn't it when you think of it. All these many centuries, the forces of light have been struggling with the forces of darkness. Yes. But now …there is a preponderance of good, although it may not seem very much like it to you because you have to look upon all this. These troubles and violence, and so many pitiful things. And they're people just as much as you are. They're people who are trying to live. But after all, when we look upon our own country, we are gratified that we are not so much like many other people that I can look upon with pity.

Garnet: That's for sure.

Lacey-Mrs. Schmieder: And it's not their fault. It's more or less the system under which they live. And the thoughts they harbor about truth. Yes, that's another thing. Well, it has been nice to come.

Evangeline: Yes, and thank you!

Lacey-Mrs. Schmieder: So keep the good work going, won't you? And we'll gather round on the other evenings when you have other matters to attend to, will be here. And we gain very much from what the Masters have to say, which we can take up with them afterwards. I don't know how long we talk, but we do talk with them a long time after you are no longer here then.

00:16:28 Speaker 6
Lesson that one you think of it.

*hmmm, that's wonderful …*
*unknown sitter coughs loudly*

00:16:51 Speaker 6
There is a pre-pandemic so good,

00:18:02 Speaker 2
There.
00:18:04 Speaker 6
So keep the blood work going.

"Masters' nights" comprise a distinct genre of séances carried out by Lacey's circle oriented by the sitters' desire "to learn of progress in the higher spheres."[6] In contrast to the sitting excerpted here, classed as a "visiting night," masters' nights welcomed the spirits of famed thinkers and inventors including Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, and Nikola Tesla.[7]

[6] Reel 67, 15 September 1964, SCA258-GA270-107a, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.

[7] See, for example, Reel 2, 1960-1962, SCA258-GA270-2a, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.

Well now. I suppose it's proper to say goodnight, isn't it?

*soft laughter, that's right, good night, good night, Mrs. Schmeider …*

00:18:53 Speaker 7
Doesn't matter.
00:18:59 Speaker 4
I need it.

[…]

*yes? hello?*

00:32:12
Lacey-George Louth's father: (inaudible) … Hello, George? Hello, there … How do I go … Yeah, well … I've been looking for you … a longtime.

The voice is low, soft, shaky, and hesitant. Again, a Derbyshire accent.

I can discern a soft echo that muffles and muddles this voice, perhaps indicating the use of a spirit trumpet—an aluminum cone that could levitate around the séance room in order to amplify spirit voices. In Lacey's circle, trumpets are particularly useful when spirits are inexperienced and require additional assistance making themselves heard. As this encounter implies, audible speech requires practice on the part of the spirits with vocal virtuosity and dexterity improving with more frequent visits.

George: You have? And you got to at last?

Lacey-George Louth's father: Yes.

George: Yes, that's good.

Lacey-George Louth's father: This is your father, yes.

George: Well, I'm glad to hear your voice, dad.

Lacey-George Louth's father: Well, I've been … I've been trying a long time to get in.

George: You have, eh?

Lacey-George Louth's father: At last, I've come.

George: Well, thank you.

The exchange proceeds slowly, as Lacey-George Louth's father finds his words falteringly. George and the other sitters speak back slowly and gently; they are coaxing, welcoming, and encouraging.

Lacey-George Louth's father: I thought I would, yes, because I thought I'd make a big attempt tonight to come because I don't want you to think, George, that I'm floundering around here.

George: No, I didn't think so, Dad. I thought that you were busy progressing and you'd come through some time …

Lacey-George Louth's father: Yes, yes, yes, that that's right. And I wanted you to know this, that your wife's been with me for a good many years now, as you measure it.

00:33:16 Speaker 4
And I wanted you to know this, that your lights main wires made all for good many years. Now as you measure it.

George: That's right.

Lacey-George Louth's father: And I've met up with the little lady here who took care of you for some time.

George: That's right.

Lacey-George Louth's father: And I've been in her company a lot and …

George: She's helped you quite a bit?

Lacey-George Louth's father: Oh yes, she's helped me quite a lot.

George: That's lovely.

Lacey-George Louth's father: Yes, and I also saw your Uncle George too, yes.

George: Yes, Uncle George, a long time since he came here.

Lacey-George Louth's father: He told me he'd been to speak with you. He didn't tell me when.

George: Oh it was some time ago …

Lacey-George Louth's father: He told me all about the canal incident and everything about it and … by golly, you … (inaudible).

George: But you um … you get along nicely now, eh Dad? And mother, too?

Lacey-George Louth's father: Yes. Well, don't you miss the old surroundings?

George: Oh yes, I do. Yes, yes sir. And Bert, how is Bert getting along? I often think of him.

Lacey-George Louth's father: Very, very well. It's the funny brothers didn't stay together. Really got separated.

George: Yes

Lacey-George Louth's father:: Well, I'm glad to know that.

George: Well, I often think of the old spot, when we used to go down to the old Milton church and the bell rang, you know?

Lacey-George Louth's father: Yes, yes, I thought you missed them places.

George: Yes, I often think of it, Dad. A pleasant thought to help you on your way.

During these longer, personal conversations, my attention often drifts. I resist the impulse to skip ahead or listen at 2x speed in search of more revealing details or more dramatic spirit manifestations. I try to avoid busying myself with other tasks, to still my urge to putter or scroll. I let myself fall into the lulling rhythm of the exchange: so miraculous in substance and so mundane in content. I have access to very little information about the lives of the sitters and the family members who come through, but am nonetheless ushered into the affective event that the séance contains and comprises. I sit with the gentle rapport between people who are strangers to me but intimate with one another, the slow patter expressing care and concern for loved ones on either side of the divide. I'm struck by the relative brevity of each spirit's appearance. Indeed, the recording in its entirety is 87 minutes long and registers the presence of 14 distinct spirits. The conversation between George and his father lasts only about five minutes, and is one of the longest exchanges in this séance recording. Little is revealed or imparted. Contact alone is confirmation and comfort; intimacy arrives in and as the voice.

Lacey-George Louth's father: Yes. Well, I've done what I said I'd do tonight.

George: Yes, You must come again though.

Lacey-George Louth's father: I will now! It's not the …

George: Once you've got a little stronger?

Lacey-George Louth's father: It's not as difficult as I thought it would be.

George: No, it wouldn't be, no. How about Grandfather Gray? Do you see Grandfather Gray around?

Lacey-George Louth's father: Yes, yes I do. And they've all been rounded up, most of them.

George: Well, I'm glad of that.

Lacey-George Louth's father: Yes, I … I don't think there's any of them gone astray here. No, no, they're all more or less rounded up. And we get together.

George: That's wonderful. Well, I'm certainly pleased to hear …

Lacey-George Louth's father: And I … I should thank you for your attention and your thoughts from time to time.

George: Yes. Well, I think of you, Dad, all the time, so you've got my loving thoughts to help you.

00:36:12 Speaker 2
Well, I think I'll be a dead all.

Lacey-George Louth's father: But I … I am sorry that I didn't uh make this attempt before. I should have done …

George: Well, just … I suppose … we do get sometimes a little backwards sometimes.

Lacey-George Louth's father: Oh, I … yes, I was a little timid about it.

George: Well, I'm glad you made the grade alright now.

Lacey-George Louth's father: So now I'll tell Janey that I've been.

George: That's right. Thank you very much, Dad.

Lacey-George Louth's father: Yes. I'll tell … I'll tell her I've been and that everything's all right.

George: Well, we keep in touch with one another now. Thank you.

Lacey-George Louth's father: Goodnight, Georgie and all your friends are here that's sitting around. Goodnight to everyone.

*15 seconds of silence between the previous spirit departing and Lacey-Walter speaking*

[…]

01:22:35

Lacey-Walter: Yes. And who is there to say I can't come?

*ahhh of recognition*

Otto Smith: You're always welcome.

Lacey-Walter: Yes. It is me, Walter. Yes, there are times when I can say a few things and I think what has been said tonight has been said with a great deal of seriousness. I mean, even though it might have seemed rather light on the surface, I think they do think these things. Very much light has come to them. And they, and only they, have the better opportunity to portray what they have come to know. Now, in my own case, I can't make these comparisons. I can only tell you what I know, what I've experienced and what is the truth. But they can make the comparatives. And they can bring home a point where I wouldn't have the least opportunity of doing so. But there are many things I can talk about, and that is our own specific way of life, and what we do here, and what I do, what I've been trained to do, and what I love to do. And I think that's the greatest theme here: the depth of love you have to do the things you do. I think that's a very key thing in everything that we undertake to do.

*that's right. we like to hear your voice too, Walter ... share a thought sometimes, yes.*

01:22:59 Speaker 2
We'd like to hear your voice, to hold it.

*yes, yes*

*yes, yes that's right*

Garnet: Walter, it couldn't possibly be otherwise.

Lacey-Walter: No.

Garnet: How could it be heaven if you spend eternity doing something you hated doing?

Lacey-Walter: Yes. And they tell me too that that there is some kind of a saying-- "God is love," which helps me to understand what you think about that too.

Unknown sitter: That’s right. Well, it's been very lovely tonight, Walter. We’ve enjoyed it very much.

Lacey-Walter: Yes. Well, now I've opened the door to so many I don't know how many, but I did the best I could. And I regulated it as well as I could. So I think most of them have had their say here and they've been able to conclude what they wanted to say and that's always gratifying and satisfying. I don't like it to be when one comes in and they begin, they say one or two words, and then they don't complete it. I much prefer that they have the ability to say what they're going to say. And then there’s satisfaction all the way around. And now it's my duty to draw the curtain. Thank you. Goodnight.

*yes, yes, it was wonderful! very good ... mmm*

*yes ... ahh, that’s right*

*thank you very much! thank you, cheerio, thank you, Walter, good night, Walter!*

*tape cut*

**2. Intimate space-making**

According to Tamara Kneese, "every smart home is already haunted."[1] Throughout her book *Death Glitch,* she evokes haunted house metaphors to describe a number of relations, dynamics, and phenomena associated with networked devices designed for use in domestic spaces: "smart technologies are invisible, ghostly presences,"[2] Alexa and Siri are "invisible angels" that uphold an interconnected network of sensors and devices,[3] smart homes are "haunted by … surveillance infrastructures," which capture and store user data for often undisclosed future uses,[4] and smart systems are capable of remembering preferences and carrying out routines in the absence of their original users, such that "the dead haunt others through the Internet of Things."[5] Kneese also describes that ways that smart devices might behave in unexpected and alarming ways when remotely activated by agents external to the household: "the hacked smart home is in essence a haunted house: lights flicker and appliances appear to turn on by themselves."[6]

Kneese's liberal use of spectral rhetoric is apt, insofar as it echoes public discourses that describe a variety of unexpected smart device activations as profoundly spooky encounters.[7] Popular critiques of Alexa also describe the intended functionality of Echo smart devices, in particular the practice of recording user interactions and circulating audio data to Amazon's

[1] Tamara Kneese, *Death Glitch: How Techno-Solutionism Fails Us in This Life and Beyond* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), 142.
[2] Kneese, *Death Glitch,* 160.
[3] Kneese, *Death Glitch,* 154.
[4] Kneese, *Death Glitch,* 151.
[5] Kneese, *Death Glitch,* 144.
[6] Kneese, *Death Glitch,* 150.
[7] See, for example, the popular Reddit thread "What's your creepy Alexa/google home story?", which catalogues smart tech misfires, unprompted actions, and eerie utterances; "What's your creepy Alexa/google home story?," r/AskReddit, Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/ac4rs7/whats_your_creepy_alexagoogle_home_story/.

cloud server, as a creepy violation of consumers' private lives.[8] Indeed, Kneese's allusions to haunting give emphasis to these anxieties, endowing an ominous and potentially nefarious cast to the data capture integral to smart systems. Haunting, as deployed here, seems to primarily name a surreptitious dynamic of displaced power or agency: when technologies behave in such a way that undercuts the mastery of the user. As Kneese states: "control itself becomes a kind of haunting," when it falls into the hands of entities other than a home's inhabitants.[9]

While I share Kneese's concerns regarding intimate surveillance and data privacy, her capacious invocation of haunting to describe asymmetrical relationships between humans (both living and deceased), AI agents, and infrastructures, reduces the term to a kind of catch-all for the discomfort and disquiet that emerges around smart tech and its various effects. Without examining the historical and cultural specificity of the trope of the haunted house,[10] haunting itself remains an under-explored concept in *Death Glitch.* Haunting becomes a rhetorical flourish that glosses over the material and social conditions that produce unsettling feelings regarding smart tech, rather than a framework for meaningfully interrogating them. What goes unexplored is what precisely is being unsettled and how.

I am interested not only in what smart devices do to and within the physical architecture of contemporary homes (the register to which Kneese's hauntings are confined), but what disturbances and revisions they instigate with the regard to the home as a cultural form. I

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[8] See, for example, Rachel Metz, "Yes, Alexa Is Recording Mundane Details of Your Life, and It's Creepy as Hell," MIT Technology Review, May 25, 2018, https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/05/25/142713/yes-alexa-is-recording-mundane-details-of-your-life-and-its-creepy-as-hell/

[9] Kneese, *Death Glitch*, 150.

[10] For an example of a more fulsome engagement with the social dynamics that haunting might name and be used to interrogate, see Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

therefore consider smart homes in dialogue with Lauren Berlant's concept of "institutions of intimacy": zones or frames of comfort or familiarity, such as the family, the couple, and to which I add the home, invested with the hope that relations formed within those zones will fulfill traditional promises of happiness, will comprise "a life."[11] Crucially, "the inwardness of the intimate is met with a corresponding publicness,"[12] as such institutions of intimacy serve as normative frames for organizing and categorizing experience. Moreover, Berlant seeks to "engage and disable" prevalent discourses regarding "the proper relation between public and private."[13] While scholars have begun to unpack this false binary, describing such categories as "legacies of a Victorian fantasy,"[14] Berlant suggests that such accounts overlook "the continuing attraction of the attachment to this division," which organizes and justifies other forms of social distinctions, including gendered forms of labour, work and leisure, and marked and unmarked personhoods. While the relationship between public and private is indeed a fantasy, this is not grounds for dismissing the force it exerts in the world. As Berlant describes, "a simple boundary can reverberate and make the world intelligible."[15]

In this chapter, I consider both smart homes and séances as sites in which the attachment to the division of public and private is mobilized and reinforced, despite the fact that these spaces are necessarily predicated upon a kind of porosity or seepage between them. With this in mind, we might revisit and reclaim Kneese's assertion that the smart home is "already haunted" if this haunting is understood, not as a question of control or creepy vibes, but the fundamental instability, yet persistence, of institutions of intimacy, which according to Berlant, are haunted

[11] Berlant, "Intimacy," 281.
[12] Berlant, "Intimacy," 281.
[13] Berlant, "Intimacy," 283.
[14] Berlant, "Intimacy," 283.
[15] Berlant, "Intimacy," 283.

by the "potential failure to stabilize closeness … making the very attachments deemed to buttress "a life" seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability."[16] I argue that the séance is good to think with when thinking about the intimacies and disturbances that smart tech sets in motion, as it makes palpable the porosities of domestic spaces and the various strategies for buttressing and re-negotiating them.

As a ritual primarily located in private homes, séances comprise a mutable practice that itself changes the contours of domestic space; practitioners of Spiritualism adopted various spatial techniques and curatorial strategies in attempts to frame and make sensible the strange intimacies of communing with the dead. Thinking with séances therefore invites thinking not only about the transgression of boundaries between public and private, but the practices by which such boundaries are drawn and re-drawn. Whereas the generic figuration of the haunted house that Kneese evokes is seemingly static in its "already" haunted-ness, séances comprise dynamic rituals that engage and modify domestic spaces and the ideologies associated with them. My thinking about séances in this way informs, and is informed by, thinking about smart homes as "spatial stories," drawing on Lynn Spigel's uptake of Michel de Certeau's concept.[17] Indeed, de Certeau's distinction between space and place is worth attending to in this context. Place implies a proper, stable, and distinct location, whereas space "is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it."[18] Place exists, whereas space "occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it."[19] Put simply: "space is a practiced place."[20] The

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[16] Berlant, "Intimacy," 282.
[17] Lynn Spigel, "Smart Homes: Digital Lifestyles Practices and Imagined," in *Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud (New York: Routledge, 2010), 238.
[18] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 117.
[19] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 117.
[20] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 117.

transformation of places into spaces is for, for de Certeau, a matter of the "distributive power and performative force" of story, which authorizes practical and social actions that comprise the ongoing practices of space-making.[21] For Spigel, spatial stories provide a way to think about the smart home as more than a corporate marketing ploy (although this is how the term "smart home" originated), [22] but rather as spaces that are constantly narrated through the activities they contain. Smart homes comprise "spatial stories for the emplotment of … possible worlds."[23]

The two proceeding sections address séances (2.1) and smart homes (2.2) respectively, unpacking the ways that each shore up and trouble the intimate institution of the home. Drawing both from academic literature and my own archival research, I identify several spatial stories that unfold in and through séance practices. Despite the prevalence and significance of home circles in the Spiritualist movement, practitioners invoke other frameworks and conventions to enact and make legible spirit communications. While still buttressed by the idealized intimate institution of the home, séances are also understood as, and indeed constructed to emulate, theatrical spectacles, laboratories, and technical systems. Séances thereby narrate the ways that even intimate practices absorb the rhetorics and choreographies of public cultures and institutions, mobilizing changing and overlapping spatial stories in order to contain and control otherworldly contacts.

Smart homes likewise enact ongoing attachments to the division between public and private, mobilizing spatial stories invested in delineating the home in keeping with notions of feminized care and labour. Indeed, the endurance of such attachments is crystalized in voice

[21] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* 123.
[22] See Spigel, "Smart Homes: Digital Lifestyles Practices and Imagined," 238; Heather Suzanne Woods, *Threshold: How Smart Homes Change Us inside and Out* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2024), xiv.
[23] Spigel, "Smart Homes: Digital Lifestyles Practices and Imagined," 238.

assistants like Alexa, which evoke and promise to uphold traditional domestic values and power dynamics while simultaneously re-drawing the boundaries of the home and the intimacies that comprise it. Furthermore, I attend to the ways that the physical space of the home is organized in order to accommodate technical systems that not only exceed it, but also promise to go unnoticed within. Despite the qualities of intangibility and unobstrusiveness conjured by the rhetoric of ubiquitous computing and ambient intelligence, smart tech not only takes up but constructs space. Smart devices, like Amazon Echo speakers, might promise to recede into the background of daily life, but they in fact require their users to orient spaces, objects, and bodies in particular ways. Just as séances comprise spatial stories and curatorial strategies to conjure and contain ethereal presences, smart homes also construct space according to technical logics in order to accommodate phantasmatic agents and infrastructures that, to borrow from Tom Gunning, "oscillate between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, materiality and immateriality."[24]

Picking up on resonances between the ways that séances and smart homes each construct publicness and privacy, section 2.3 opens with a discussion of *LAUREN* (2017-), a series of performances by Lauren Lee McCarthy in which the artist assumes the role of a voice assistant residing in the homes of her audience. I argue that *LAUREN* dramatizes the ways that smart tech buttresses the institution of the home, while constructing a corresponding publicness. Moreover, as McCarthy attempts to cultivate a sense of intimacy and care for her participants, *LAUREN* constructs a distinct, and in many ways paradoxical, mode of intimacy predicated upon inattention, upon the audience failing to notice her presence. More than emulating an "invisible angel" or ghostly presence, *LAUREN* enacts the ways that smart technologies perform

[24] Tom Gunning, "To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision," *Grey Room*, no. 26 (2007): 99.

inconspicuousness. Indeed, contemporary AI technologies are engaged in such a disappearing act—becoming increasingly hyped, while simultaneously seeking ever more seamless integrations so as to go unnoticed in our daily lives.

Furthermore, I draw a connection between the ways that smart tech calls attention to its own disappearances and the role of the human medium in Spiritualist practice. The function of the medium is explained in technical terms as a kind of mechanism, channel, or relay point within the broader intermundane network constructed through the séance. Within this spatial story, the virtuosity of a medium's performance is measured by their indiscernibility. As Marina Warner describes: "the medium at the séance in some sense vanishes like the vanishing lady in the conjuring trick because what matters are the voices and presences coming through her."[25] Within the dramaturgy of the séance, the medium therefore operates as a requisite present non-presence. Just as McCarthy, by staging her interventions in private spaces as an artwork, calls attention to her own disappearance, mediums might also be considered as "extraordinary performance artists"[26] engaged in a paradoxical showcase of their ability to vanish. I further argue that, as with Alexa, the medium's disappearance in the séance enacts what Thao Phan calls "social invisibility," predicated upon the policing of difference that render bodies and identities marked or unmarked, transparent or necessarily visible.[27] Warner's description of mediums as vanishing ladies is apt, not only because the role of the medium was often fulfilled by women, but because such performances mobilize a particular construct of femininity as passive, retiring, and necessarily suited to disappearing.

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[25] Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 272.
[26] Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, 295.
[27] Thao Phan, "The Materiality of the Digital and the Gendered Voice of Siri." *Transformations* 29 (2017): 28.

Voice is crucial to these various vanishing acts and spatial stories, as a means of performing of social invisibility and delineating zones of audibility according to logics of inside and outside, private and public. Such delineations are blurry, but they are nonetheless operational principles for "mak[ing] the world intelligible."[28] Not only is voice implicated in the ongoing attraction to and enactment of such indistinct divisions, but, as this dissertation will proceed to interrogate more depth in the following chapters, this blurriness is the space of the voice—characterized by unstable co-presences between self and non-self, presence and absence, material and immaterial.

**2.1 Home circles and intimate mechanics**

Given the origins of the Spiritualist movement in mid-19th century America, stemming from the mediumistic experiments conducted by the Fox sisters in their home, the "Victorian fantasy" of the feminized private sphere looms large in early séance practices. Ann Braude, in her account of the first several decades of the movement, notes that most people's initial encounters and experiments in Spiritualism took place at home, or in the homes of friends and neighbours.[29] By relocating spiritual practice from the church to the home, Spiritualism "secured the place of religion well within women's sphere."[30] Home circles, which comprised small and intimate gatherings of family and close friends, were considered to be "the very best" sites for communing with spirits and the "backbone" of the Spiritualist movement more broadly.[31] Alex Owen suggests that the continued emphasis on the importance of the home circle among advocates of Spiritualism—accompanied by "underlying assumptions of the sanctity of home

[28] Berlant, "Intimacy," 283.
[29] Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 21.
[30] Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 24.
[31] Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 75.

and hearth, of chaste and disciplined family feeling, and of moral scrupulousness between its members"[32]—worked to shore up the integrity of the movement when faced with critique and ridicule. Séances therefore tethered "the holiest truth to the holiest place"[33]—reifying the home as a sacrosanct institution of intimacy.

In parallel to this preoccupation with the private home as the locus of Spiritualist practice and discovery, the movement also spurred a vibrant public and commercial culture, comprising lecture circuits, popular books and periodicals, and spectacular demonstrations. Indeed, the Fox sisters gave their first demonstration in a lecture hall for a paying public in 1849—only a year after their famed encounters with spirit at home.[34] Responding to Braude's emphasis upon the sequestration of home circles as sites of moral and religious devotion, Simone Natale, whose own historical account of Spiritualism emphasizes its close connection to the development of 19th show business and spectacle, argues that even séances held in private spaces are best understood in dialogue with public iterations of the practice—as "semipublic events" characterized by social encounters and entertainment.[35] Natale notes that home séances were generally held in living rooms and parlors, with sitters gathered at a table—locating the practice in areas designated for receiving visitors and around a domestic object associated with leisure activities.[36] The séance, therefore, might be understood as "a highly regulated table game,"[37] in which sitters pursued amusement as much as spiritual enlightenment. [38]

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[32] Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 75.
[33] Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 24.
[34] Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), 1.
[35] Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments*, 43.
[36] Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments,* 43, 53.
[37] Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments*, 53
[38] For further discussion of the playful and entertaining dimensions of séances, see Mackenzie Bartlett, "Mirth as Medium: Spectacles of Laughter in the Victorian Séance Room," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to*

In addition to the convivial dynamics among sitters, private séances also might be understood as a gesture of hospitality oriented towards spirits. The ritual comprised not only welcoming living friends and family into the home, but also seeking to the make home amenable and permeable to otherworldly contacts. While the architecture of the home provided a physical container for the séance, the ritual itself comprised opening and managing channels between intermundane registers. In Thomas Lacey's séances, for example, the spirit of the medium's deceased brother Walter routinely fulfilled the role of a doorkeeper, ushering spirits into the terrestrial world and into the home, much like, to borrow Nick Richbell's turn of phrase, "a nightclub bouncer, if you will."[39] The substance of spirit communications varied considerably—from earnest theological lectures, to familiar chitchat among friends and family—however, many of the activities that transpired in Lacey's sittings align with Natale's understanding of the séance as a site of socializing, leisure, and entertainment. Séance notes describe elaborate musical performances given by spirits for the enjoyment of the sitters: mouth organs, mandolins, and ukuleles were "taken up into the air" and played by "unseen hands,"[40] and "several operatic singers"[41] wowed the sitters with the virtuosity of their "vocal gymnastics."[42] Moreover, spirits describe a spectacle unfolding in the spirit world in parallel to that in the séance room. The act of coming through in fact resembles, from the other side, spirits "taking their places on a vast stage

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*Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, eds. Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 267-284.

[39] Richbell, "Men in the 20th Century Séance Room."

[40] Report of Séance, 9 January 1932, SCA258-GA445-8, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON; Report of Séance, 23 January 1932, SCA258-GA445-9, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON; Report of Séance, 2 April 1932, SCA258-GA445-15, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.

[41] Report of Séance, 27 March 1932, SCA258-GA445-14, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.

[42] Report of Séance, 9 April 1932, SCA258-GA445-16, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.

where in turn each would step before the enthusiastic audience [of spirits] amidst tremendous applause."[43] In this regard, Walter's role might be understood as something akin to a stage manager, ensuring the orderly transition between spirit acts. Such descriptions render the séance in highly theatrical terms, with spirits knowingly assuming roles as performers.

Natale suggests that theatrical séance practices, while transpiring in private, were informed by and evolved in dialogue with public discourses on Spiritualism. The conventions, procedures, and environments that comprised séances became progressively standardized, as practitioners sought guidance from journals and publications regarding how to best orchestrate spirit manifestations.[44] Practitioners therefore implemented various spatial protocols to prime their homes for spirit spectacles. As Natale describes, "sittings were ruled by a recurring dramaturgy, which, no different from a theatrical sketch, manipulated the attention and the reactions of sitters."[45] Interventions in the physical space and atmospheric conditions of the home comprised various strategies to "steer and hierarchize [the] attention"[46] of subjects within it, enframing spirit phenomena in particular ways. For example, the placement of a cabinet in séance rooms—an enclosed space often constructed out of wood, just large enough for the medium to be seated within it—acted as a kind of miniature proscenium within the séance circle. Cabinets were often

[43] Report of Séance, 4 November 1933, SCA258-GA445-23, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.
[44] Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments*, 45.
[45] Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments,* 48
[46] I borrow this phrase from art historian Claire Bishop, who understands the display paradigms associated with the white cube and black box in the context of contemporary art museums in these terms. See Claire Bishop, "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention," *TDR/The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (2018): 30.

open on one side and affixed with a curtain, behind which the medium could be sequestered to gather sufficient energies and from which spirit voices and materializations would emerge.[47]

However, this theatrical mode of spectatorship—in which sitters oriented their gazes towards the medium in the cabinet as the locus of spirit spectacle—was upset by the need for complete darkness in order for spirits to materialize. Indeed, darkness in the séance room was a necessary and widespread hallmark of effective séance practices. Preparing a séance room therefore included measures to cover up windows and doors in order to prevent the seepage of ambient light into the room. The requisite darkness of course posed a challenge to the sitters' desire to observe spirit phenomena by essentially nullifying vision as a sensory mode of engagement. Spiritualists sought out various technical design solutions to this conundrum; Lacey's circle trialed the use of a "subdued red light," produced by placing a light in box covered with red tissue paper, hoping this might comprise an "arrangement … conducive to improved manifestations."[48]

[47] See, for example, Report of Séance, 5 Novemer 1932, SCA258-GA445-18, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON;
Report of Séance, 14 January 1933, SCA258-GA445-19, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.
[48] Report of Séance, 5 November 1932.

Figure 2: Séance participants, including the medium William Cartheuser (second from left), in the home of Jenny O'Hara Pincock (far right) in St Catherines, Ontario (c.1930). Two spirit trumpets, as well as cut flowers, are visible in the foreground of the photo. Photo courtesy of University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections & Archives.

Figure 3: Séance participants in the home of Jenny O'Hara Pincock (far right) in St Catherines, Ontario (c.1930). Spirit trumpet and flowers visible in the foreground. Photo courtesy of University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections & Archives.

Practitioners also implemented material and technical interventions into the séance room that aided sitters in attuning to their other senses—hearing, touch, and even smell—to bear witness to the spectacle of spirit communication. Rather than directing sitters' gaze and attention towards a singular focal point, the dramaturgy of the private séance comprised the ritualized placement of objects in the room such that they might help sitters experience and locate spirit phenomena unfolding around them in the darkness (or near darkness). Notes and photographs from Jenny Pincock's home circle, which convened regularly between 1927 and 1935, attest to the routine placement of a dish of water, cut flowers, and spirit trumpets on the floor in the center of the séance circle [Figure 2-3], as well as musical instruments including a violin and tambourine for spirit activation.[49] Throughout the séances, water from the dish was sprinkled over the sitters,[50] and roses and sweet peas were suspended in the air, discernible to sitters through gentle caresses and their perfumed scene.[51] Spirit trumpets—collapsible cones made of aluminum that were mass produced and advertised in Spiritualist periodicals for the express purpose of making spirit voices audible [Figure 4]—also levitated over the course of the sitting, resulting in spirit voices seemingly emanating from different parts of the room. Trumpets spun rapidly in the air above the circle and made physical contact with the sitters, tapping on their shoulders, legs, and feet. The sensory coordinates of the séance are therefore characterized by sitters in fixed positions in the circle attending to moving and dispersed sonic, tactile, and olfactory foci. The enactment of this particular spatial story—in which the home is a site of

[49] Séance notes, 27 January 1930, SCA94-GA64-4-114, Maines Pincock Family fonds, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.
[50] Séance notes, 27 January 1930.
[51] See Séance notebook, 1930, SCA94-GA354-16, Maines Pincock Family fonds, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON; Séance notes, 19 March 1929, SCA94-GA64-4-109, Maines Pincock Family fonds, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.

sociability, delight, and wonderment—comprises a distinctly immersive and multisensory spectacle


Figure 4: Eckel's standard trumpets promotional flyer (c.1930). Photo courtesy of University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections & Archives.

In addition to the entanglement between public Spiritualist cultures and the practices of home circles, the relationship between séances and science also complicated the figuration of domesticity and the curation of domestic spaces. Citing Donna Haraway's characterization of the scientific laboratory, with its own peculiar oscillation between public and private, as a "theatre of

persuasion,"[52] Beth Robertson's account of séance practices foregrounds a different spatial story, highlighting the ways that domestic environments were furnished to more closely resemble a lab. The growing inclinations towards rational and regimented inquiry, and a desire to distance the investigation of spirit phenomena from the popular culture of Spiritualism that Natale describes, advanced a trend among psychical researchers towards more spare and clinical spatial arrangements. Ideally, practitioners should dedicate a "specially prepared" room "set aside for communication with higher intelligences,"[53] sequestered from more day-to-day social and domestic activities. Robertson describes the process of constructing an appropriately austere séance room in gendered terms: such preparations comprised "ridding the space of all stereotypically feminine markings,"[54] including familial keepsakes, domestic objects, and plush furnishings in favour of an "increasingly bare and utilitarian space."[55] The task of refashioning séance rooms according to spatial and aesthetic principles aligned with "masculine objectivity" was considered, according to Robertson, "a necessary step toward transforming their unique brand of study into a bona fide science."[56]

The séance room in the home of Dr. T.G. and Lillian Hamilton, for example, is emblematic of this clinical mode of curating the home in ways that diminish its feminine-coded homey-ness in order to support aspirations for scientific credibility. While Lillian Hamilton began hosting casual séances in the living room of the family home in the early 1920s, Dr. Hamilton's increasing interest and investment in psychic science resulted in more formalized and systematic

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[52] Haraway, Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 5.
[53] Report of Séance, 9 April 1932.
[54] Robertson, *Science of the Séance,* 44.
[55] Robertson, *Science of the Séance,* 40.
[56] Roberston, *Science of the Séance*, 39

séances.[57] In 1923, the Hamiltons dedicated a room on the second floor of the house, which "in essence … became a scientific laboratory,"[58] designed specifically for convening and meticulously documenting séance proceedings. Diagrams of Hamilton's séance room [Figure 5] indicate adjustments made to the physical space, such as windows that were "permanently darkened" and air vents that were "baffled" in order to secure, contain, and control conditions within the room. Such illustrations also record the sparseness of the room, stripped of furnishings apart from those that directly supported the registration of spirit phenomena; tables and cabinets provided surfaces upon which spirits might register their presence kinetically—through rappings, levitations, and other physical manipulations. The prominent placement of electrical gadgetry including gramophones, cameras, fans, and various types of lighting also suggests the degree to which the séance room was crafted through the integration of numerous technological devices, demarcating the space as a site of serious scientific enquiry.

[57] Serena Keshavjee, ""Experiments and Experiences in Psychical Research": Scientific Séances in Winnipeg," in *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs*, ed. Serena Keshavjee (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2023), 49.
[58] Keshavjee, "Experiments and Experiences in Psychical Research," 49.

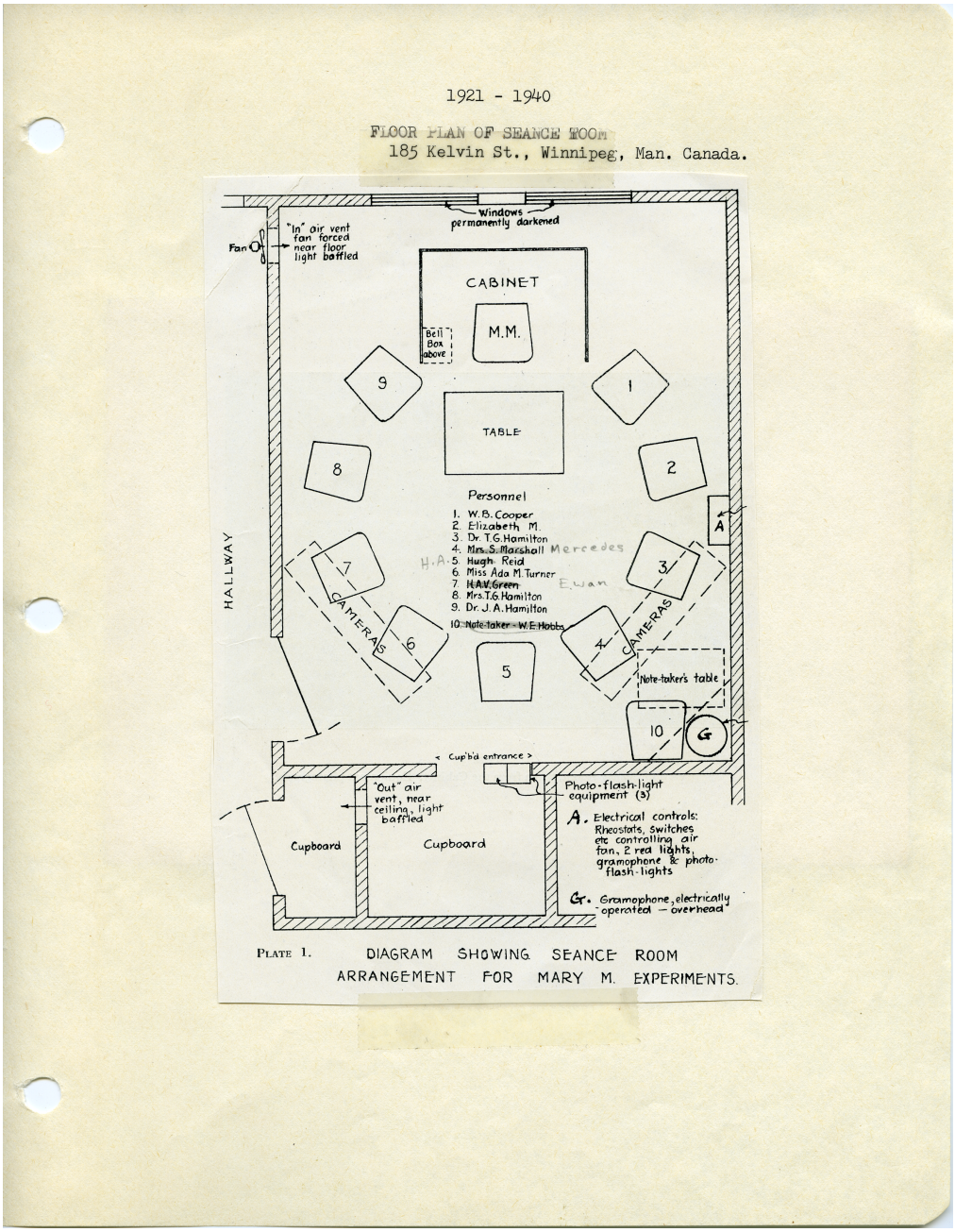


Figure 5: Floor plan of the séance room prepared by T.G. Hamilton in his home for experiments with the medium Mary M. (1921–1940). Courtesy of University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections.

Not only is the lab-like séance room characterized by the presence of electrical devices, but it enacts yet another spatial story in which the séance itself *is* a technology. The built environment of the room and the deliberate placement of objects and bodies within it not only

contains but comprises the necessary infrastructure for producing tangible spirit manifestations. Practitioners shared a technical understanding of the séance as a kind of "spirit battery,"[59] with many of the aforementioned features of séance rooms implemented with the express purpose of building a material and energetic apparatus. Darkness was not only a dramaturgical or atmospheric requirement, but in fact wholly necessary for a functional séance. So too, the recurring placement of a dish of water, alongside spirit trumpets and cut flowers, on the floor in Pincock's séance room was thought to help "form the battery mixture" required for the séance to function.[60] Sitters actively engaged with objects in the room, by "shuffling, stamping, [and] rubbing hands on cabinet walls or table top," for example, in order to generate adequate "psychic power."[61] Not only was the arrangement of sitters in a circle considered essential, but the particular placement of individuals within the circle also required careful consideration. An alternating pattern of men and women was generally desirable,[62] but such arrangements also considered more granular details. Hamilton wrote that newcomers "must be placed at a point most distant from the medium, with all the accustomed sitters being interposed between the medium and the strangers" in order "to maintain the correct harmonious balance of the group."[63] The sitters therefore were more than observers of spirit phenomena; they were "unconscious contributors to the power," integral to the "atmospheric conditions" that facilitated spirit

[59] Sconce, *Haunted Media,* 29.
[60] Séance notes, 16 March 1929, SCA94-GA64-4-108, Maines Pincock Family fonds, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.
[61] "Procedures outlined and demanded by Walter," n.d., MSS 14, Box 17, Folder 10, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.
[62] Sconce, *Haunted Media,* 29.
[63] "T.G.H. on trance," n.d., MSS 14, Box 9, Folder 11, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.

communications.[64] Moreover, the collective presence of the sitters was understood in technical terms: as "little cogs fitting into one machine."[65]

While there is some historical sequence to these spatial stories, as the growing prominence of psychical research in the early decades of the 20th century precipitated changes in séance practices, it would be reductive to situate them as distinct formations that evolved in a linear fashion. Because of the independence of home circles from universalizing directives or doctrines, different groups enacted these spatial stories in various overlapping configurations. Even as practices became more standardized, the prevalence of the laboratory framework did not in every instance nullify attachments to the sacredness of the home or desire for spectacle and sociability. Pincock's home circle, for example, demonstrates a kind of hybrid approach to séance practices. Contemporaneous to Hamilton's engagement in psychical research, Pincock also regarded her own séances as an earnest scientific pursuit. In *Trails of Truth,* her book published in 1930 documenting her experiments, she bemoans novice or unserious ventures into convening séances, declaring that "psychic research should receive the same logical attention as any other scientific subject."[66] While still committed to generating irrefutable evidence, Pincock's approach suggests that these empirical aims and the intimate dimensions of séances were not so hostile to one another. Particularly notable in this regard are her notes from a séance which doubled as a "children's party"—a festive occasion in which the "children of earth talked with the children of Heaven,"[67] enjoying music, games, and candy together.[68] The séance room in

[64] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 22.
[65] "Walter Foretells Two Things" (séance notes), 19 May 1929, MSS 14, Box 15, Folder 16, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.
[66] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 20.
[67] Séance notes, 16 March 1929.
[68] For a more in depth discussion of Pincock's séance for children in the context of early 20th c. cultures of childhood and grief, see Jane Nicholas, "The Children's Séance: Child Death, The Body, and Grief In Interwar Ontario." *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 11, no. 2 (2018): 188–207.

Pincock's home, depicted in photographs [Figure 1], also comprised a lush sitting room with patterned wallpaper, heavy drapes, and a piano, with books, a mirror, and other decorative objects placed on a mantelpiece. The physical environment reflects and supports an investment in séances as familial and convivial practices, as well as scientific endeavor.

I offer the spatial stories outlined above—séance rooms as sequestered and feminized sites of moral purity and righteousness, as arenas for semipublic and mirthful spectacle, as laboratories, and as technical apparatuses—not as a rigid taxonomy, but a series of appropriable tropes which practitioners might draw upon and remix to make their paranormal pursuits meaningful in various ways. In the following section, I explore the ways that smart homes not only share several spatial conventions with séances, as they likewise make room for invisible tech and disembodied voices, but might also be understood as modulatory cultural practices that work with and against structures of containment and boundary-making associated with a public/private dichotomy.

**2.2 Circumferential zones and ambient smartness**

The term "smart home" originated in the mid-1980s as a marketing phrase for the American home-building industry as it sought to forge and promote alliances with digital communications technologies.[69] Heather Woods suggests that the smart home might be understood within the context of a neoconservative reaffirmation of privatized domesticity—once again, attesting to the ongoing appeal of the Victorian fantasy of separate spheres—which reworked nostalgic visions of family and the home in keeping with the advancement of free

[69] Spigel, "Smart Homes: Digital Lifestyles Practices and Imagined," 238; Woods, *Threshold*, xiv.

market economics.[70] This figuration, in which advances in computational technology are mobilized in service of preserving a white upper-middle class domestic ideal, continues to inform the development and marketing of contemporary smart tech. Both as a cultural signifier and in practice, smart homes advance the paradoxical promise "to maintain what had come before under the signifier of future technologies."[71] Much of this harkening back to an earlier, idealized vision of domesticity plays out in highly gendered ways, as smart tech offers solutions to feminized forms of housework and care labour, while seeking to establish friendly, familiar, and companionate relationships with users. Woods describes the voice assistants integral to contemporary smart homes, including Alexa, as "new old housewives," speaking to the durability of regressive ideas about femininity as integral to the intimate institution of the home and their reiteration as organizing principles for digital technologies and the futures they promise to usher in.[7273]

This invocation of feminized labour as a means to ground "futuristic" technologies in traditionalist imaginaries is, according to Woods, closely linked to the equally contradictory imperative "to bound the interior while linking it to the outside world."[74] Smart homes reify bourgeois spatial taxonomies that frame the private sphere as a respectable, desirable, and distinct institution, worthy of protection from the threatening expanses of the public sphere. Yet at the same time, smart technologies disintegrate these very boundaries. While media

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[70] Woods, *Threshold*, xiii-xiv.
[71] Woods, *Threshold,* xiv.
[72] Woods, *Threshold,* 103.
[73] For additional scholarly perspective that discuss voice assistants in relation to the figuration of the housewife, see Yolande Strengers and Jenny Kennedy, *The Smart Wife: Why Siri, Alexa, and Other Smart Home Devices Need a Feminist Reboot*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020); Yolande Strengers and Larissa Nicholls, "Aesthetic Pleasures and Gendered Tech-Work in the 21st-Century Smart Home." *Media International Australia* 166, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 70–80; Heather Suzanne Woods, "Asking More of Siri and Alexa: Feminine Persona in Service of Surveillance Capitalism." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no. 4 (October 2018): 334–49.
[74] Woods, *Threshold*, xiv.

technologies have long been understood as a means of bringing the outside world into the home, necessitating various strategies of containment,[75] Spigel, writing presciently in 2005, suggests that smart devices offer a distinct mode of doing so by virtue of their interactivity, which "should be understood as part of a social milieu in which people are asked to work more of the time, in more locations."[76] She argues that digital interventions "re-clock" the "normative rhythms of domestic time," such that home becomes "a place where the resident is in a perpetually interactive state of preparedness."[77] The blurring of the private and public sphere is therefore tied to a dissolution of any distinction between labour and leisure, with the smart home becoming "the ultimate workplace."[78]

Moreover, smart tech introduces new porosities into domestic life by "subtly and carefully stitching users into the platform economy from the comfort of their homes."[79] The increasing saturation of smart technologies in home environments not only creates more opportunities for users to engage in the digital marketplace (by, for example, asking Alexa to place an order from Amazon), but introduces digitally networked sensors that monitor and track user interactions in order to predict behaviour and spur consumption. Smart integrations via the Internet of Things make it possible for corporate entities to capture and datafy myriad domains of activity, such as the use of home appliances, light and temperature control, and morning and bedtime routines. Emily West describes the ways that Amazon in particular markets this "surveillance as a

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[75] See, for example, Carolyn Marvin and Lynn Spigel's respective discussions of telephones and televisions; Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990); Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[76] Lynn Spigel "Designing the Smart House: Posthuman Domesticity and Conspicuous Production," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 8, no. 4 (2005): 415.
[77] Spigel, "Designing the Smart House," 414-415.
[78] Spigel, "Designing the Smart House," 403.
[79] Woods, *Threshold*, 13.

service," offering customers enhanced customization at the expense of their data.[80] For example, Alexa offers several "predictive and proactive features" including Hunches, automated actions based on usage patterns, such as adjusting lights and thermostats when Alexa predicts that a user has left home or gone to sleep. [81] Amazon boasts that "one in four smart-home interactions is initiated by Alexa — without customers' having to say anything,"[82] as if Alexa has developed such exhaustive knowledge of its users that it can anticipates their actions and desires. West suggests that this hyper-personalized service cultivates reciprocal affective attachments to Alexa, which seemingly understands its users in such granular detail: "Amazon's tools and techniques of surveillance create tremendous intimacy between consumer and brand—achieved through the sensations of being seen, heard, and known."[83] This mode of intimacy cultivated through smart tech is necessarily at odds with privacy, as it is enabled by expansive infrastructures and indeed captures and recirculates user data far beyond the confines of the home.

The smart home, therefore, acts as a spatial story that crafts a locus for processes that are necessarily unlocatable, for intimacies made legible through the frame of the home that nonetheless far exceed it. The weight given to the home as a bounded and defined space counterbalances what Orit Halpern and Robert Mitchell call the modulatory "space of smartness," which crucially does not adhere to traditional borders, whether those of the body, the home, or the nation state.[84] Indeed, smart technologies connect individual users to vast amounts of aggregated data from other global jurisdictions and rely on material infrastructures contained

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[80] Emily West, *Buy Now: How Amazon Branded Convenience and Normalized Monopoly* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022), 110
[81] Sven Eberhardt, "The Science behind Hunches: Deep Device Embeddings," Amazon Science, March 16, 2022, https://www.amazon.science/blog/the-science-behind-hunches-deep-device-embeddings.
[82] Eberhardt, "The Science behind Hunches."
[83] West, *Buy Now*, 128
[84] Orit Halpern and Robert Mitchell, *The Smartness Mandate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022), 11.

within various national territories to do so. According to Halpern and Mitchell, smart tech is best understood according to a logic of malleable zones, characterized by "geographic abstraction, detachment, and exemption."[85] Smart homes, I argue, give form to this detachment; the design of purpose-built "smart from the start"[86] homes and off-the-shelf devices for retro-fitting previously un-smart environments cultivate spatial manifestations of an ambient, abstract smartness.

Woods notes that the spatial setup of smart homes is characterized by the distribution of networked devices across physical space, such that user interactions are seemingly unbound from discrete technologies.[87] This is evidenced in Amazon's approach to smart tech, in which Alexa is compatible with televisions, personal computers, headphones, lightbulbs, security systems, thermostats, and vacuums produced and marketed by other brands, as well as devices from Amazon's in-house product line of Echo smart speakers, thus creating possibilities for ubiquitous voice-activated integrations within the home. Crucially, Amazon's marketing materials distinguish Alexa, the artificial intelligence who "lives in the cloud,"[88] from the hardware of the Echo device; the former is irreducible to the singular object status of the latter. Promotional imagery for Echo speakers depict the spherical form of the best-selling Echo Dot in white, charcoal, or grey-blue placed in modern, sleek to the point of austere, domestic environments. Often (although not exclusively), marketing materials place Echo devices in kitchens—alluding to their utility in supporting the feminized work of homemaking. Moreover, the devices are presented in such a way that diminishes their presence in home environments. The Echo is

[85] Halpern and Mitchell, *The Smartness Mandate*, 12.
[86] Woods, *Threshold*, 37.
[87] Woods, *Threshold*, 17.
[88] "Alexa Features," Amazon website, accessed September 12, 2024, https://www.amazon.com/b?ie=UTF8&node=21576558011.

depicted as one among several items, such as dishes, food canisters, vases, and houseplants, sparsely laid out on a table or shelf [Figure 6-7]. In images that depict consumers interacting with Alexa, the human interlocutor most often appears in the foreground of the image, engaged in a task such as cooking or enjoying quality family time, with the device in the background behind them, often well-concealed to the point of indiscernibility [Figure 8]. Although the device is ostensibly what is for sale in such promotional content, what is being advertised is in fact it's unobstrusiveness within the smart environment it facilitates; in such contexts, the Echo calls attention to its own disappearance.

Figure 6: Promotional press image for Amazon Echo device.

Figure 7: Promotional press image for Amazon Echo device.

Figure 8: Promotional image for Amazon Echo device (screenshot).

The backgrounding of the Echo device in these ideal use case scenarios is further punctuated by the way that users are positioned facing the camera with their backs turned to the Echo device, as if they needn't direct their commands anywhere in particular. Indeed, in its guidelines for third-party developers building and promoting Alexa skills or built-in devices, Amazon stipulates that users ought not be depicted shouting or leaning in to the Echo, as this "lessens the perceived value of voice-first interactions."[89] Scenarios that feature users multitasking are encouraged.[90] Such representations diminish the located-ness of the microphones and speakers within the Echo that enable interactions with Alexa, and suggest that users can go about their daily lives without these interactions altering or diverting their action or attention—implications at odds with the ways that such technologies do in fact demand substantial lexical, physical, and spatial adjustments on the part of their users in order to function properly.

Observing that the often-circular design of smart speakers results in a "circumferential zone" in which commands can be received, Jason Toncic suggests that the voice of the user is "enmagicked" within the circle of audibility around an Echo device."[91] In order for this enmagick-ing to take place—for utterances to be understood by Alexa as commands—users must adopt particular speech patterns. Most notably, users are required to begin commands with the necessary "wake word" which, in Echo's default settings, is simply "Alexa." Amazon's corporate rhetoric also alludes to magic when explaining how Echo devices work, instructing consumers to "think of the wake word as a verbal cue that makes things happen," akin to the

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[89] "How to Interact with Alexa," Amazon Developer website, accessed July 8, 2025. https://developer.amazon.com/en-US/alexa/branding/alexa-guidelines/communication-guidelines/how-interact-alexa.
[90] "How to Interact with Alexa."
[91] Jason Toncic, "I Dream of Siri: Magic and Female Voice Assistants." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 7, no. 2 (October 26, 2021): 5.

phrase "open sesame."[92] Beyond the wake word, there are other vocal and grammatical patterns that users are encouraged to adopt, with "expert" users developing a lexicon of commands that most effectively yield their desired results.[93] Alexa works more smoothly when interactions are initiated with simply "Alexa," rather than more conversational summons or modes of address like "Hey Alexa." Alexa also responds better to commands, as opposed to questions (as in "Alexa, find me a breakfast place," rather than "Alexa, are there any breakfast places nearby?").[94] The grammatical structure for proper "Alexa utterances" is sampled all throughout Amazon's user-facing website, and the company provides precise guidelines indicating that third-party developers should do the same [Figure 9].[95] For all that users are advised that they can and should interact "naturally" with Alexa, at a normal pace and volume like they would with a friend,[96] the repeated emphasis on proper phrasing suggests that such speech patterns need to be taught to consumers, as simple as they may seem.


Figure 9: Alexa utterance guidelines for third-party developers (screenshot).

[92] "How Alexa Works: Wake Word," Amazon website, accessed July 8, 2025. https://www.amazon.com/b?ie=UTF8&node=99607949011.
[93] Natale, *Deceitful Media*, 119-120.
[94] "How to Interact with Alexa."
[95] "Alexa Utterance Guidelines."
[96] "How to Interact with Alexa."

Not only is the so-called magic of Alexa utterances and wake words contingent upon proper and practiced phrasing, but it exists only within the circumferential zone of audibility around the Echo device. Alexa therefore conditions both linguistic habits and bodily orientations, as users learn to enunciate, project, and direct their voices in space and in proximity to smart tech. Indeed, the centrality of voice activation and interfacing to Alexa's functionality dictates where Echo devices are best placed with home environments, and how users modulate their physical activities according to Alexa's listening capabilities. Hadar Levy-Landesberg introduces the term "phatic alignment" to describe the ways that bodies and technologies are arranged and adjusted within a shared space in order communicate sonically, observing that voice assistants engage in this process in distinct and notable ways.[97] Whereas sound-based technology has typically sought to draw the attention of proximate hearing-able humans (through ringing bells, beeping alarms, alerts etc.), smart speakers invert this dynamic: it is Alexa that is poised in a state of attentiveness, waiting to be summoned by the user. Echo devices carry out a kind of always-on listening to the home environment until the wake word is detected, at which point the Echo begins recording user interactions and circulating audio data to Amazon's cloud-based servers.

In the privacy section of their public facing website, Amazon stresses that user conversations remain private and unrecorded unless the wake word is detected by the Echo device. Returning to the aforementioned "open sesame" analogy, Amazon seemingly suggests that wake words endow users with authority over the flows of data in and out of their homes, framing this vocal control in spatial terms: "Use the phrase, the door opens. Don't use the phrase,

[97] Hadar Levy-Landesberg, "Listen up! Phatic Thresholds and Sound Interface Design," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 10 (2021): 3086.

the door stays shut."[98] Levy-Landesberg, however, suggests that the semi-dormant listening associated with smart devices "generate[s] a fluctuating, more varied phatic hold on the user" that exceeds a neat distinction between whether a communication channel is open or closed.[99] While Amazon avows that "listening" only begins following wake word detection,[100] thereby implying that always-on audio detection comprises something other than listening,[101] this is more accurately understood as a differentiation between registers of attention—not whether or not sonic data is being gathered, but a variation in the ways that it is being filtered, circulated, and stored.

Voice user interfaces are therefore made intelligible to their users according to the logics of a stable and securable threshold between domestic inside and public outside, while enacting much more blurry and permeable relations across this imagined threshold. While smart technologies invoke the familiar intimate institution of the home in their design and marketing, the smart home in fact engenders other modes of intimacy particular to it. Not only does voice play a crucial role in cultivating such intimacies, but, as the following section examines, the social division that accompany a public/private divide—those associated with gender, race, and class—are reified in and by the voice.

### 2.3 Disappearing acts, coloured lights, clean slates

*LAUREN* (2017-) is an ongoing series of performances, in which artist Lauren Lee McCarthy installs custom smart devices, including cameras, microphones, speakers, sensors,

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[98] "How Alexa Works: Wake Word."
[99] Levy-Landesberg, "Listen up! Phatic Thresholds and Sound Interface Design," 3086.
[100] "How Alexa Works: Wake Word."
[101] For more on the lack of consensus regarding whether machine learning systems, in so far as they convert sound into data, might be understood as listening, see Jonathan Sterne, "Is Machine Listening Listening?" *communication+1* 9, no. 1 (2022): 1-4.

locks, lights, faucets, and other appliances, in the homes of volunteer participants. For a period of (in most cases) three days, McCarthy watches over the home, remotely activating smart devices in response to participants' voice commands. McCarthy also intervenes pre-emptively, doing things for users without their asking: selecting and playing music to suit the appropriate mood, activating an aroma diffuser to release a relaxing scent at bedtime, and boiling a kettle to make tea in the morning.[102] *LAUREN* contributes to ongoing debates regarding surveillance and data capture associated with smart technologies, with McCarthy expressing particular concern regarding the willingness among consumers to welcome such devices into the "really personal territory" of the home.[103] By stepping in as "a human Alexa"[104]—replacing the AI persona and its opaque infrastructures with a singular person whom participants knowingly address when they call out for "Lauren"—McCarthy seeks to make plain the extent to which smart tech is granted intimate access to users' lives.

On her website seeking to recruit prospective participants to welcome *LAUREN* into their homes, McCarthy explains that she aspires "to be better than an AI" by "adapting to your desires and anticipating your needs."[105] McCarthy contends that she is better able to understand her participants than an algorithmic system, declaring: "I'm not like Siri and Alexa. They don't care about you!"[106] At the outset of the project in 2017, therefore, McCarthy foregrounded care and intimacy in ways that seemingly foreshadow the ways that such values have subsequently

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[102] Sharon Mizota, "Alexa, Meet Lauren: L.A. Artist Turns Her Apartment into an Experiment in Artificial Intelligence," *Los Angeles Times*, November 28, 2017, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-lauren-mccarthy-review-20171127-story.html.
[103] Dominic Rushe, "Let Me into Your Home: Artist Lauren McCarthy on Becoming Alexa for a Day," *The Guardian*, May 14, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/may/14/artist-lauren-mccarthy-becoming-alexa-for-a-day-ai-more-than-human.
[104] Lauren Lee McCarthy, "LAUREN," accessed July 2, 2025, https://get-lauren.net/LAUREN.
[105] Lauren Lee McCarthy, "LAUREN: The Human Intelligent Smart Home," accessed July 2, 2025, https://get-lauren.com.
[106] David Leonard, "Lauren Testimonials," Vimeo, March 11, 2020, https://vimeo.com/397068136?p=1s.

emerged as pillars for Amazon's program of development for Alexa.[107] While McCarthy's thesis presumes that care is exclusive to human actors, the predictive features discussed above speak to a more ambivalent intimacy—to its capaciousness, malleability, and co-optability. Rather than debating whether or not smart tech can care about its users, I suggest that it is perhaps more fruitful to consider what happens to care as such when it becomes the domain of AI agents, dataveillance, and corporate infrastructures. Where I think McCarthy's work is more successful in pursuing such a line of questioning is with regard to the mythical division between public and private. Critical responses and curatorial framings of *LAUREN* tend to first and foremost describe the work as a straightforward critique of the potential privacy violations associated with AI interventions in domestic spaces. While such concerns are indeed a thematic focus of the work, *LAUREN* comprises an act of space-making that refuses any stable separation between public and private by making the home into a performance space. Here, I consider not only the dynamics that the artwork addresses, but those that it enacts; *LAUREN* redraws the boundaries of the home in complex and overlapping formations that amplify the space-making procedures of both smart homes and séances.

As an ongoing project, *LAUREN* has been exhibited numerous times and staged in galleries in a variety of ways.[108] Installations often include domestic soft furnishings—like beds, sofas, arm chairs, and rugs—with video or photographic documentation from McCarthy's in-home interventions mounted to the walls. A recent iteration of the work exhibited at Kunstmuseum Bonn in 2024, for instance, was housed in a small pavilion "designed to feel like a

[107] In addition to the aforementioned reference to "human empathy and affect" in the Re:MARS presentation discussed in the introduction, see Katie Robertson, "Amazon Bets on an Empathetic Alexa," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/03/business/amazon-alexa-david-limp.html; Laura Stevens, "'Alexa, Can You Be Empathetic, All-Knowing and Funny?'" *The Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/alexa-can-you-be-empathetic-all-knowing-and-funny-11551971093.
[108] Exhibitions include Haus der elektronischen Künste (2019), Frankfurter Kunstverein (2020), HMKV at Dortmunder U (2022), Ford Foundation, (2023), and Kunstmuseum Bonn, (2024).

cross between a social space and a home space,"[109] with attendees invited to lounge on a bed to watch video footage playing on a monitor attached to the ceiling [Figure 10]. The space was also outfitted with elements of McCarthy's bespoke smart tech system, with McCarthy herself activating the work at various points throughout the exhibition.


Figure 10: *LAUREN* installation view at Kunstmuseum Bonn (2024).

In its original iterations, however, *LAUREN* comprised performances without any particular public-facing output or exhibition venue in mind;[110] from McCarthy's perspective, "the number one audience" for *LAUREN* "is the person participating in it."[111] While more recent

[109] Lauren Lee McCarthy, "Q&A: Let's Talk About LAUREN," interview by Rainald Schumacher, Kunstmuseum Bonn, October/November 2024, https://www.kunstmuseum-bonn.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/QA_Lauren-Lee-McCarthy_english.pdf
[110] McCarthy, "Q&A: Let's Talk About LAUREN."
[111] Lauren Lee McCarthy, "Want a Smart Home Assistant? Invite This Artist to Watch You for Three Days Instead," interview by Hrag Vartanian, Hyperallergic, December 25, 2017. http://hyperallergic.com/417839/lauren-mccarthy-smart-home-assistant-interview/.

presentations fabricate domestic environments in the gallery, early phases of *LAUREN* construct the home as a performance space, with the in-home participants as co-constituents of the artwork. Not only, therefore, does *LAUREN* make "really personal territory" public by displaying images and video footage from the homes of her participants in a gallery; the work also reconfigures the home itself by virtue of her artistic intervention, which renders its inhabitants as both spectators and performers. Even if McCarthy seeks to advocate for a kind of safeguarding of the home among a broader museum-going audience, the performance frames everyday domestic life in theatrical terms.

Moreover, the theatricalized space of the home that *LAUREN* constructs is predicated upon a particular, and perhaps peculiar, mode of spectatorship, characterized as much by inattention as attention. The in-home performances certainly demand more from their participants than is commonly asked of a viewing public. As McCarthy describes, "in terms of an art audience, normally you get 20 seconds and they're giving me three days,"[112] to say nothing of the vulnerability associated with allowing one's home life to be watched over, recorded, and displayed. However, the dynamics of conventional spectatorship are not so much intensified as inverted. Accounts from participants suggest that their awareness of McCarthy's presence oscillates between registers of attention—in some instances being preoccupied with her presence such that their day-to-day activities are "turned … into a performance"[113] and in others "forget[ting] that she's around, even though she's kind of always around."[114] Indeed, it is McCarthy who gives a kind of rapt attention to her participants—endeavouring to sleep when

[112] McCarthy, "Want a Smart Home Assistant?"
[113] Mizota, "Alexa, Meet Lauren."
[114] Leonard, "Lauren Testimonials."

they sleep, bringing her computer with her to the bathroom if necessary in order to provide uninterrupted service.[115]

While to some degree, the in-home audience become performers for McCarthy and future gallery viewers, the desired outcome of McCarthy's performed attentiveness is that the audience will, hopefully, not notice her presence within their homes. Indeed, McCarthy states that her "dream version" of *LAUREN* would last for a period of six months, such that participants "really forget" that she's there. [116] *LAUREN* therefore holds in tandem dual desires to make audiences aware of the encroaching surveillance facilitated by smart tech, while also constructing relations so intimate that smart interventions go unnoticed. McCarthy aspires to know and serve her audience so well as to vanish completely into their daily lives. *LAUREN* thus calls attention to a paradoxical disappearing act that, I argue, is constantly enacted by smart tech.

The endebtedness of smart speakers and the Internet of Things to the dream of ubiquitous computing is well documented.[117] A vision for the future of technology that emerged in the 1990s, ubiquitous computing advanced a conviction that "the most profound technologies are those that disappear;"[118] networked computers could be seamlessly integrated into physical space, facilitating constant, casual interactions such that consumers forget they are using computers at all.[119] Indeed, the design and marketing of Alexa, and the Echo smart speakers that house it, suggest that such technologies recede from attention altogether, that their value resides in their inconspicuous operation. Alexa's functionality is thus guided by an ideology of inattention, despite the fact that, in the many ways discussed above, it organizes and takes up

[115] McCarthy, "Q&A: Let's Talk About LAUREN."
[116] McCarthy, "Want a Smart Home Assistant?"
[117] Kneese, *Death Glitch,* 146; Sun-ha Hong, "Technofutures in Stasis," 1941.
[118] Mark Weiser, "The Computer for the 21 St Century," *Scientific American* 265, no. 3 (1991): 94.
[119] Hong, "Technofutures in Stasis," 1943.

space within the home. *LAUREN* doubles down on this feature of smart tech—palpably present technologies that announce their own self-effacement, that ask users to notice how unnoticeable they are—by staging and showcasing this vanishing act, by drawing attention to a performance of invisibility.

Notably, one of the design elements of the *LAUREN* system that supports this disappearing act is the use of a synthesized voice, rather than McCarthy speaking with the in-home audience directly—a choice McCarthy made "so that I could more easily fade into the home."[120] Contrary to the prevailing wisdom in voice interface design that natural-sounding voices, as opposed to robotic or audibly synthetic ones, are more appealing to users,[121] McCarthy seemingly points to the fact that low modality speech is integral to the experience of voice activated smart tech. Users have come to expect an audibly automated voice, and indeed Alexa's invisibility is to some degree predicated upon its inhuman-ness. Although both *LAUREN* and Alexa foreground vocal interaction as a mode of interfacing suited to cultivating intimacy with users while also receding from their attention, McCarthy's use of an automated voice, rather than her own, provides an intriguing counterpoint to Amazon's positing of voice as an inherently more "human" mode of interfacing.[122] Indeed, Amazon describes voice as "the most natural user interface,"[123] suited to cultivating both affective attachments and more seamless transactions with digital platforms. Yet, it is seemingly crucial, as McCarthy picks up on and enacts in

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[120] Lauren Lee McCarthy, "Feeling at Home: Between Human and AI," Medium, February 15, 2018, https://immerse.news/feeling-at-home-between-human-and-ai-6047561e7f04.
[121] For a discussion of the cultural dimension of high vs. low modality speech, see Justine Humphry and Chris Chesher, "Preparing for Smart Voice Assistants: Cultural Histories and Media Innovations," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 7 (2021): 1971-1988.
[122] "Getting Started with Voice: Strategically Use Voice Technology to Accelerate Your Business," Amazon Developer website, accessed July 9, 2025. https://developer.amazon.com/en-GB/alexa/getting-started-with-voice.html.
[123] "Getting Started with Voice."

*LAUREN*, that voice assistants themselves don't sound like a specific person, even as they allude to a general human-ness. As Ido Ramati observes: "the voice assistant persona in predesigned to sound both like someone *and* no-one-in-particular."[124]

The crucial question, then, is which voices are considered best suited to disappearing? What does no-one-in-particular sound like? Alexa's default voice—which denotes femininity, whiteness, and middle-class-ness[125]—is designed with these objectives in mind. Thao Phan suggest that a successful natural user interface is invisible to its users, and that, in the context of voice assistants, "the category of the invisible becomes … a performance of the socially invisible."[126] Phan thereby accounts for the gendering of voice assistants in these terms: Alexa becomes an invisible actor within the home via the deployment of a normative gender identity. Returning to the gendered functionality of smart tech as "new old housewives," voice assistants like Alexa figure this paradigm in their auditory design. By not only promising to take on traditional domestic and care labour, but by continuing to associate such labour with a feminized persona, Alexa performs a vanishing act predicated upon a "perfect mimesis of the social order."[127] In addition to Alexa's gendering, Phan elsewhere comments upon the ways that the utterances of digital assistants "evade specific identifying cultural inflections,"[128] while adhering to American, British, or Australian national accents which rarely reflect actual regional specificities. Alexa therefore mobilizes whiteness as a category of unmarked-ness; as West

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[124] Ido Ramati, "Algorithmic Ventriloquism: The Contested State of Voice in AI Speech Generators," *Social Media + Society* 10, no. 1 (2024): 7.
[125] Amazon offers various options for customizing Alexa voices, according to gender, accent and other identity markers. However, Ido Ramati argues that the ability to switch between voices ultimately affirms Alexa's default voice as proper and authentic to the interface, reifying the original persona upon which others might be temporarily applied. See Ramati, "Algorithmic Ventriloquism," 8.
[126] Phan, "The Materiality of the Digital and the Gendered Voice of Siri," 28.
[127] Phan, "The Materiality of the Digital and the Gendered Voice of Siri," 28.
[128] Thao Phan, "Amazon Echo and the Aesthetics of Whiteness." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5, no. 1 (April 1, 2019): 21.

remarks: "Alexa's whiteness is confirmed rather than undermined by the fact that it is so rarely remarked upon."[129] [130] Social invisibility, undergirded by the logics of whiteness and hetero-patriarchy, therefore provides crucial grounds for Alexa's disappearing act.

The contradictory logic of disappearing while remaining palpably present resonates with séance practices, particularly the figuration of the medium as a mechanism within the broader system of the séance. Practitioners deployed various technological metaphors to account for the medium's function in channeling spirit communications. Both Steven Connor and Anthony Enns respectively observe an analogy between the Spiritualist medium as a "quasi-mechanical relay"[131] and the role of a telephone switchboard operator, facilitating lines of connection across vast distances.[132] Radio analogies also proliferate in accounts from early 20th century séance practices, with an attending spirit in one of Pincock's séances describing the necessity of a human medium that operates as "a radio set … that makes it possible for us to get in touch with one another."[133] Crucially, as the term medium itself indeed implies, the role of the spirit medium in the séance is to act as an intervening channel for intermundane communications, ideally contributing as little noise to the messages transmitted from the spirit world as possible. Performing this function often required that the medium slip into trance, psychically absenting themselves from the goings on in the séance room. Records describe Lacey, for instance,

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[129] West, *Buy Now,* 132.
[130] Such dynamics are made plain in the re:MARS presentation discussed in the Introduction, in which the demo of Alexa's voice cloning abilities was staged by a Black child and, we are led to presume, a Black grandmother. By inviting spectators to expect a voice that audibly differs from the default, the presentation mobilized Blackness to heighten the effect, to cast the possibilities of this voice cloning feature into high relief, which indeed further affirms the conflation of whiteness with neutrality in the default voice.
[131] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 215.
[132] Anthony Enns, "The Undead Author: Spiritualism, Technology and Authorship," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, ed. Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 56.
[133] Séance notes, 17 October 1929, SCA94-GA64-4-110, Maines Pincock Family fonds, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.

"voluntarily giving his psychic power and allowing the spirit operators to remove him from his physical body during the course of the manifestations."[134] Thus, for all that a functional séance required a gifted medium, their presence was simultaneously a kind of non-presence.

Such flawless communications were rarely achieved, and indeed Spiritualists offered technical, even proto-cybernetic, explanations as to why this was the case. As psychical researcher Hereward Carrington described, the necessary reliance on "the physical organism of the medium" meant that messages received through it "must perforce take on some of the tricks and peculiarities of that organism;" "thus, the physical and mental mechanism of the medium must necessarily color and influence the character of the communications, to some extent."[135] Despite the inevitability of such distortions, the measure of a good medium was nonetheless considered the degree to which they might be minimized. This desire is rendered clearly in an audio recording from one of Lacey's séances, in which a spirit explains:

> "I've often thought about a light … if you have a light within a glass globe and if the globe itself is clear, then you're going to get the light clear. But if the globe through which the light comes is coloured, then there's going to be a little colouration of the white light that's inside, isn't there? And that's very much the way it is with us that come to you. We don't like our thoughts to be interfered with … I'm quite sure that my real thoughts are reaching you. I hope it will always be so."[136]

This assessment of Lacey a clear glass globe allowing messages to be received "un-coloured" indicates the ways that Spiritualists measured the efficacy of a medium by their transparency, their ability to perform vanishing while remaining an embodied presence in the séance room such that messages from the spirit world might be heard seemingly without interference.

A medium's transparency might also be understood as a question of social invisibility.

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[134] Report of Séance, 4 November 1933.
[135] Carrington, *The world of psychic research*, 70.
[136] Reel 4, 7 June 1962, SCA258-GA270-6a, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.

Although mediumship was considered a craft that could be cultivated and honed with practice, Spiritualists also maintained that certain individuals were better predisposed to receiving spirit communications. As famed advocate of Spiritualism Arthur Conan Doyle described: "great intellect stands in the way of personal psychic experiences. The clean slate is certainly the most apt for the writing of a message."[137] This requisite blankness, or lack of strong intervening personality that might colour or muddy spirit communications, accounts for the conviction that women were de facto better suited to mediumship. Passivity, sensitivity, and mental plasticity were considered essential qualities for an effective medium—all attributes ascribed to women.[138] This perceived affinity between blankness, susceptibility, and femininity also intersected with class, as working class and under-educated women were often considered particularly adept channels for spirit presences.[139] Mediumship was therefore understood as form of distinctly feminized labour—facilitating intermundane transmissions while registering their own presence as little as possible. The aforementioned analogy of the switchboard operator is also apt in this regard, as a form of "women's work" in which human labourers were considered as a kind of automata—mechanisms for relaying messages rather than subjects capable of crafting their own.[140] Much like Alexa, the medium's disappearing act depends upon their assimilation within prevailing social hierarchies.[141]

Despite such dreams of glass globes, clean slates, and interfaces vanishing into the woodwork, mediating technologies remain palpably present in both séances and smart homes—

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[137] Arthur Conan Doyle, "The History of Spiritualism" (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1926), 2.
[138] Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 26
[139] Robertson, *Science of the Séance,* 49.
[140] Enns, "The Undead Author," 56.
[141] I argue that this is equally the case for male mediums such as Lacey and Cartheurser, for whom other social identities (i.e. class and ability) are offered as evidence of their predisposition for mediumship. See discussion on male mediumship in the introduction and Chapter 4.

taking up space and commanding attention, even while performing their own unobtrusiveness. Such contradictory performances and co-presences emerge from attempts to tell stable and familiar spatial stories in scenarios that are necessarily destabilizing to the intimate institution of the home. Delineating and safeguarding the private sphere is therefore predicated upon the effacement and denial of certain material presences and relations contained within domestic spaces. In the following chapter, I further examine the terms of, and what is at stake, in this denial: what is the role of voice in signaling the presence of a (non)presence?

**INTERCHAPTER B) – much colour will come**

[…]

Only about four seconds of silence elapse between the previous spirit—Mrs. Schmeider, an older woman with a high-pitched and slightly creaky voice—bidding the sitters goodnight and Grey Feather's entrance. The change in voice is dramatic, dropping in pitch and increasing in volume.

*greetings! yes? welcome!*
*Grey Feather?*

*to whom are you coming, Grey Feather? overlapping speech, inaudible questions…*

*hmmm … yes*

00:19:03
Lacey-Grey Feather: I … me … long for come here. Sometime me long to come for some time. Grey Feather with you tonight. Many more. My brother chief here also. Many of them. They ask me speak. So I come. I come White Eagle, Happy Wolf. Many, many brave come tonight. Blue snake one. [1]

Garnet: But we mean, Grey Feather, to which one are you coming here?

Lacey-Grey Feather: Ah! I come, I come to big Chief to feel much young again. Big chief.

Garnet: That's you, Dad!

Otto Smith: No, is it me?

Lacey-Grey Feather: You! I come. Me not White Feather, me Grey Feather.

Otto Smith: Oh, you come to me!

Lacey-Grey Feather: I come to you!

Otto Smith: Good! And you're welcome. I thought you came …

Lacey-Grey Feather: Me smoke … me smoke pipe with you.

Lacey-Grey Feather's speech patterns, composed of simple, truncated phrases, with dropped articles and faulty pronouns, is shared among the many Indigenous spirits who frequent Lacey's séances—a characteristic "broken English" taken by the sitters as a reliable indication of Indian-ness.[2]

[1] Reel 67, 23 September 1964.

[2] Kathryn Troy, *The Spectre of the Indian: Race, Gender, and Ghosts in American Séances, 1848-1890* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2017), 34.

Otto Smith: Oh yes. Uh-huh.

Lacey-Grey Feather: Me smoke pipe, you come to ceremonial dance. You? Alright. You come with me.

*yes, murmurs …*

Unknown Sitter: He came last time; He said he was a brother to white people … and he came with the other Indians here, they were …

Lacey-Grey Feather: Two time I've come hunting around here. Two time now I come.

*yes, very good …*

Unknown Sitter: Very good.

*two times, yes it's true*

Lacey-Grey Feather: Would like to be with my brother. I find much … much good here so I come with him here. Now I let them come, but come to smoke pipe with you. How!

00:20:58 Speaker 2
Traffic home.
*thank you!*

*how!*

[…]

"How!" is an anglicized approximation of a Sioux greeting widely used in depictions of North American Indigenous people in literature and popular media beginning in the mid-19th century, regardless of their language, location, or tribal identity.[3] Such stereotypical rhetoric and grammatical patterns indicate that Lacey-Grey Feather speaks in a register familiar and palatable to white Spiritualists in the early 20th century, albeit inauthentic.

Following Grey Feather's departure, another spirit, Happy Wolf, immediately appears. I listen for changes in the voice: perhaps ever so slightly higher in pitch and fractionally more fluent, but equally booming and boisterous.

[3] Raymond William Steadman, *Shadows of the Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 69-72.

00:27:47
Garnet: You're the big chief there, you know …

Lacey-Happy Wolf: Yes, I am big chief.

Garnet:
Big, big chief over all the others.

Lacey-Happy Wolf: I am big chief. I give name to [inaudible].

The difference is meager enough that ASR perceives Lacey-Grey Feather and Lacey-Happy Wolf to be identical, attributing their speech to Speaker 4. Overall, however, ASR loosely lumps together all of the Lacey-spirit voices into two speaker profiles, with all ten male spirits aggregated as Speaker 4 and four women spirits as Speaker 6—despite differences in accent, cadence, and fluency among them. While it remains impossible to say definitively what biometric characteristics ASR detects and operationalizes to create speaker profiles in this context, such designations seemingly allude to the prevalence of gendered pitch ranges in this calculus.

Garnet: In other words, you're the chief chief!

*laughter*

Lacey-Happy Wolf: Yes, I give name to [inaudible]. I give name also to longhouse. I open door to longhouse. I gather Braves in longhouse.

00:28:00 Speaker 4
I give name to be.

Garnet: Oh, I see. You're sort of a master of ceremonies there …

Lacey-Happy Wolf: More than that, I … they are my guests. Yes I am host to them.

*oh yes, good ...*

Garnet: That's fair. You're my guest and they're your guest.

Lacey-Happy Wolf: Yes, yes. So you always have long and good protection.

Garnet: Oh, that's fine. Our friend here, Happy Wolf. Art, you know, who's here … he was very glad that you came through to him at Chesterfield.

*overlapping speech, inaudible…*

Lacey-Happy Wolf: I promised that.

Garnet: Yes.

Lacey-Happy Wolf: I promised I would come and I came to him. Good place to find my friends there.

Art: Ohh yes, yes.

Lacey-Happy Wolf: Many Indian name. It is place of Indian there.

Art: That is right.

Lacey-Happy Wolf: Blue Snake. He come from there.

Art: Oh yes. We went to see the mounds.

Lacey-Happy Wolf: That is where Blue Snake is. Well, that is where he was. He not there now, but that where he was.

Art: Lots of corn down there.

Lacey-Happy Wolf: Someday, someday, many people find many things there. Government too stupid to look. But many things will cover history very much, if they find it. For it is not buried … things are not buried that man may not see them.

Garnet: But I guess Happy Wolf, they're very interested in these mounds and they're not anxious to disturb them so that you can still see the form and shape of them. I guess that's why they don't excavate.

Happy Wolf's support for excavating burial mounds seems to endorse a very literal extractivist approach to Indigenous artefacts and culture, as a means to craft a "more colourful history" or enrich the cultural identity of settler-colonial nations.[4]

[4] For a discussion of these ongoing dynamics in the context of Canadian multiculturalism, see Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 121-122.

Lacey-Happy Wolf: No. It is pity. For much color will come to history.

Garnet: If they do excavate?

Lacey-Happy Wolf: If they do. Like in your country, many things have been found in your country that makes colorful history of past. Many people like that. I don't know why, because we no longer live. And tribes that now are left behind care not about these things. For they have moved about the Earth and they are no longer there. As a tribe, I mean. They are more like you to me. They speak your language.

Garnet: They're mixed with us, yes.

Lacey-Happy Wolf: Yes, they live very much like you. Those who have respect for themselves, I mean. There are others who do not. I must admit. But it was good to come tonight again and speak. Happy Wolf will always be on hand. Yes, always. How!

00:30:17 Speaker 4
For much color will come to history.
00:30:20 Speaker 5
If they do, exclude if they do.

*oh that's true ...*

Although details are sparse, Happy Wolf seemingly lived in a long-distant past and faraway place, with no particular tie to or regard for the Indigenous communities still living in their ancestral lands near Kitchener. The disdain expressed here for contemporary Indigenous people, whose lives deviate from the imagined ideals of Happy Wolf's culture, is striking. The séance, in its collapsed temporality, therefore comprises an arena in which vague and nostalgic visions supersede the realities of the present, cultivating what Molly McGarry describes as "the future power of the (un)vanished Indian."[5]

*we know that ... sure, Happy Wolf ...*

*thanks now, Happy Wolf! how!*

00:32:08 Speaker 4
No joke.

Such caricatured vocal manifestations of Indigenous and other racialized spirits make plain the ways that séance dramaturgy draws from tropes and stereotypes rehearsed in popular entertainment, as well as the incontrovertible colonial logics upon which

[5] McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 73.

the Spiritualist movement is founded. Encountering these racial pantomimes, and the sitters' jovial reception of them, is unsettling. It also demands a re-configuration the listening techniques I set out to practice at the outset of my archival research. Seeking to avoid becoming overly preoccupied with the veracity, or lack thereof, of séance records, I sought to cultivate an agnostic listening attitude in keeping with Manning's framing of "hypothetical sympathy:" a suspension of pre-conceived opinions in favour of seeking to understand "what it feels like to believe" the theory under consideration.[6] Sympathy with the authors of these records—entertaining the possibility that the voices on the tape belong, in fact, to spirit interlocutors and not to the medium—becomes unsustainable with when confronted with these racialized performances. The critical gesture therefore becomes not a matter of suspending my own disbelief, but interrogating the suspensions of disbelief among the sitters—what conditions and ideologies permit hearing these vocal performances as authentic? And what, in turn, do such performances permit?

[6] Manning, "Against Method," 63.

**3. Untouched Sound**

Building on Chapter 2's discussion of the porosity of domestic spaces as constructed in both séances and smart homes, this chapter picks up on another promise associated with both of these techno-vocal scenarios—the diminishment of touch as a means to affirm the miraculous-ness of vocal phenomena, whether associated with spirit or ambient computing. Emily West suggests that, for Amazon, voice technologies are presumed to reduce "friction" in consumer interactions with cloud platforms by making requests and purchases "hand-free."[1] The elimination of typing or tapping on a device is characterized as a means of streamlining purchases, even if, in practice, voice-based transactions are prone to becoming time consuming and unwieldy.[2] Such a conviction in the effortless-ness of voice technologies aligns with what Rachel Plotnick identifies as a trend in contemporary user interaction design, which increasingly views touch as a limitation or liability, against which voice is proffered among possible alternatives in the "next evolutionary step in "organic" interfacing."[3] Indeed, the calls on Amazon's websites for third-party developers to "shape the future with voice"[4] seemingly imply that haptic interfacing is soon to become outmoded.

Yet, Plotnick astutely observes, such redesigned interfaces are never truly touch-less. Most Echo devices, for instance, are still equipped with haptic controls such as on/off switches and volume buttons, and if users wish to make more complex adjustments to the devices' settings, they are called upon to do so in the Alexa App via smart phone touchscreen. Rather than eliminating tactility, such technologies, according to Plotnick, "(often unsuccessfully) ask the

[1] Emily West, *Buy Now*, 120.
[2] West, *Buy Now,* 134.
[3] Rachel Plotnick, *Power Button: A History of Pleasure, Panic, and the Politics of Pushing* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018), 253.
[4] "Alexa Skills Kit."

user to navigate through a technical world while pretending that these control mechanisms don't exist […]. As a result, users find themselves making all kinds of physical and social adjustments to this universe, all the while being told that they should have a seamless interaction that doesn't necessitate any accommodations."[5] Indeed, the curatorial strategies and phatic alignments discussed in Chapter 2 might be understood as precisely such adjustments: gestures and choreographies implemented by users in order to facilitate the integration of "touch-less" systems into their homes. Such bodily practices are necessary for the technical operation of applications such as Alexa, while the denial of bodily intervention and experience is equally essential to its ideological function as a means of validating the supposed immateriality of cloud computing.[6] In this context, the perceived smart-ness or advanced-ness of a technology is measured by how little touch it requires, or rather how successfully it diminishes the perception of the touches it *does* require.

The ways that Alexa promises to bypass tactile encounters with users is mirrored in the way that Alexa itself is described as a disembodied entity that "lives in the cloud."[7] Indeed, Amazon's branding guide for skills developers insists that Alexa is represented as "an artificial intelligence (AI) and not as a person with a physical body or a gender identity."[8] It's telling, I believe, that body and gender are paired and effaced in this way. Amazon is emphatic that skill developers not use "she" or "her" when referring to Alexa, and provide a list of sample responses to demonstrate how Alexa might maintain gender neutrality when confronted with common user questions that presume its femininity. When asked "Alexa, will you marry me?," Alexa's current

[5] Plotnick, *Power Button*, 253.
[6] See Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).
[7] "Alexa Features."
[8] "The Alexa Personality," Amazon Developer website, accessed September 12, 2024, https://developer.amazon.com/en-US/alexa/branding/alexa-guidelines/communication-guidelines/brand-voice.

programmed response is "I don't want to be tied down. In fact, I can't be! I'm amorphous by nature."[9] Not only therefore does Alexa's "amorphous nature" align with metaphors of cloud computing, but this anecdote constructs Alexa's fluidity in opposition to the solidity presumably granted to feminized subjects through heterosexual marriage. Alexa's airy insubstantiality is dependent upon shedding the weight of a gendered body. Amazon thus activates the presumed social function of gender in human-computer interfacing as a means to make users feel at ease by reproducing familiar power relations, only to then deny it in the name of disembodiment. Amazon therefore seems to subscribe to a longstanding dualism in Western thought in which the body is constructed as that which drags down the immaterial soul or intellect, with women cast in the role of the body.[10] The disavowal of Alexa's gendering therefore serves to affirm its lightness and unfettered intelligence, in keeping with a belief that "that which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest …".[11]

In this chapter, I locate and explicate ways that séances similarly denounce bodies, arguing that these practices in fact construct very particular modes of embodiment through the pursuit of disembodiment. The dominant narrative crafted by Spiritualists, investigators, and historians alike is one in which not only are spirits understood as disembodied entities, but the practices of spirit communication are believed to progress in such a way that the quality and authenticity of spirit speech is measured by the degree to which it bypasses the bodies present in the séance room. The graduation from automatic to direct voice is recounted as a common trajectory in a medium's development;[12] in the former, spirits speak through the medium in

[9] "The Alexa Personality."
[10] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).
[11] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight,* 5.
[12] The circle convened by Dr. T.G. Hamilton, an associate of Dr. Crandon, demonstrated a similar trajectory.

trance, whereas in the latter, voices manifest independently of the medium's body. J. Malcolm Bird's detailed account of Margery's mediumship, which he investigated and published in his capacity as an affiliate of the American Society for Psychical Research and editor of *Scientific American* magazine in the mid-1920s, narrates such a progression. The circle's initial experiments took the form of table tapping, in which sitters posed yes or no questions and interpreted an answer based on the gesticulations of the table placed in the centre of the circle upon which sitters placed their hands.[13] When spirits first began to vocalize in Margery's séances, they did so by "using the medium's vocal apparatus" after she had fallen into trance, a method deemed less "clumsy" than communicating via the table.[14] After a few months of practicing this technique, spirit controls, most prominently Margery's deceased brother Walter, began attempting the transition from automatic to direct voice. These independent vocalizations initially manifested as "a soft formless blowing," developing into whispers and whistles before achieving clearly articulate speech.[15] Walter's manifestations via direct voice went on to become, as Bird describes, "so thoroughly standardized a feature of the séances that it seems no longer necessary or even desirable to catalogue it."[16] Despite the fact that direct voice ultimately became habitual or common place in Margery's séances, its development is nonetheless notable as a testament to the medium's refined capabilities, as well as the amenable conditions created by the attending sitters. Indeed, direct voice was widely understood by Spiritualists as a more rarified skill, a particularly virtuosic mode of mediumship that, according to Bird, "makes a far

[13] Bird, *Margery,* 17.
[14] Bird, *Margery,* 48.
[15] Bird, *Margery,* 73.
[16] Bird, *Margery*, 148.

greater demand upon the psychic powers present in the séance room than that of the automatic variety."[17]

Direct voice is situated as a more advanced mode of spirit communication not only by contemporary chroniclers of the maturation of individual mediums, but also in more recent historical accounts that plot the evolution of séance practices more broadly alongside the development of telecommunications technologies. Numerous scholars tell the story of Spiritualism in symbiosis with the evolution from the telegraph to the telephone and radio,[18] and indeed, séance practices emulate the transition from encoded tapping to voicing as the form via which distant messages are transmitted and received. Steven Connor further suggests that the perception of direct voice as a more sophisticated technique for spirit communication, and its increase in prominence in the late 19th and early 20th century, might be understood to hinge upon the fact that the role of the medium in this scenario more closely resembles that of a telephone switchboard operator rather than a telegraphist.[19] Whereas the latter deploys haptic gestures to transmit messages in Morse code and decodes them through practiced listening, the former establishes connections through which distant interlocutors commune with one another. In Connor's telling, the telegraphist produces and interprets sonic signals, whereas the telephone operator merely facilitates them. Telephony therefore requires less active bodily and intellectual intervention from the operator, who is simply charged with putting the caller through.[20] The "striking reduction in the substantial presence … of the medium"[21] that accompanies direct

[17] Bird, *Margery,* 303.
[18] See, for example, Sconce, *Haunted Media*.
[19] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost" 212.
[20] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 215.
[21] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 214.

voice, which no longer makes use of the medium's vocal apparatus, might be understood in correspondence with this shift.

Connor calls the non-oral utterances produced through direct voice mediumship examples of "untouched sound," suggesting the Spiritualist pursuit of voices that bypassed a bodily speaking apparatus affirms "an equivalence between spirituality and the diminution of touch."[22] Indeed, for believers, the lack of discernible connection between a spirit voice and a physically present body was considered evidence, beyond doubt, that such utterances belonged to supernormal personalities. The fact that direct voices originate from disbursed locations in the séance room, crucially at a remove from the physical body of the medium, affirms, according to Bird, that such manifestations comprise "in all sense an objective psychic phenomenon."[23] As this chapter will explore in depth, providing sufficient evidence of the disembodied-ness of spirit voices—making credible "wildly incredible"[24] vocal phenomena—is a notable point of fixation and contention for Spiritualists and psychical researchers. Once proven to be genuine, direct voice is held in such high regard that it lends credibility to the entire Spiritualist belief system, establishing that anything, even the most incredible manifestations of spirit, might be possible and legitimate.[25]

The significance of direct voice as "objective" evidence that supports a broader faith in spirit phenomena resonates with the way that Amazon posits voice interfacing as a bellwether for the future of ambient computing that it prophesizes. Once again, the diminishment of touch is a means to signal the genuine-ness of seemingly miraculous phenomena. Alexa might therefore be

[22] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 215.
[23] Bird, *Margery*, 77.
[24] Bird, *Margery*, 292.
[25] Bird, *Margery*, 302.

understood as a technology that deals in the dream of untouched sound, conflating disembodiment with technical advancement in order to endorse broader claims regarding the AI future Amazon aspires to cultivate. Furthermore, Plotnick's claim regarding the persistence of tactility in touch-less systems is equally applicable in the context of séances, in which even "untouched" voices necessitate bodily contacts, sensations, and procedures. As this chapter will elaborate, séances might be understood as technologies of disembodiment that are conversely active in "proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way."[26] Working in a similar vein to Michel Foucault's repressive hypothesis regarding sexuality, I argue that part of what AI inherits from Spiritualism is a discourse "which speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say."[27] The dream of disembodiment is underpinned by a pre-occupation with bodies, and the séance is a mechanism by which (non)bodies are constructed in specific ways.

Even in meticulous accounts of Spiritualist practices, the equation of the diminishment of touch with technical progress is seemingly hard to shake. Aura Satz, for example, in a study that foregrounds the use of inscription instruments such as typewriters, slates, and phonographs in séance rooms, sets out to chart a trajectory in which "we see the operating hands become more disengaged … only to prove the marvel of 'look, no hands!'"[28] The narrative that she sketches out at the beginning of the chapter suggests that the hands of mediums exercise a progressively "lighter touch" as the task of registering spirit presences ultimately shifts to mechanical technologies: "the detached hand of automatic writing is replaced by the cautious lowering of a

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[26] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 107.
[27] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1,* 8.
[28] Aura Satz, "Typewriter, Pianola, Slate, Phonograph: Recording Technologies and Automisation." in *The Machine and the Ghost: Technology and Spiritualism in Nineteenth- to Twenty-First-Century Art and Culture*, ed. Sas Mays and Neil Matheson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013): 37-38.

tone arm and placing of a needle in a groove."[29] Yet in the account that follows, not only do bodies of mediums and sitters remain integral in the operation of various communication technologies, such as spiritoscopes and Ouija boards, but spirits themselves are understood to signal their presence in the room by means of discarnate hands. Insofar as spirits can touch sitters, wield trumpets, or strike the keys of a piano or typewriter, they are understood to do so via a disembodied (non)body, through "the haptic choreography of nimble fingers."[30] A specific conception of body-ness, a lingering quality of a body untethered from the physical presence of a body, is therefore integral to the logic of séances. Indeed, Satz subsequently declares that "hands, both of those disembodied, disassociated from the visible living bodies, and those that served as passive transmission entities, could in fact be said to be the true agents of spiritualism."[31] By upholding a narrative of the diminishing tactility that ran alongside the increased mechanization of séance practices, what goes under-explored is the specific ways that bodies are constructed in order to make the paradox of a disembodied hand thinkable.

Connor succeeds in putting a finer point on the dynamics of disembodiment at play in séances by articulating a kind of double movement: the increasing independence of spirit voices from bodily sources seemingly emulates the dematerialization effected by modern acoustic technologies, and yet simultaneously séance practices "worked against this tendency, offering corporeal rehabilitations of the voice"[32] through supporting tactile practices and phenomena. Indeed, even though direct voices manifest without the use of a physical body, their sounding out in the séance room is accompanied by various haptic encounters with levitating trumpets and ectoplasmic appendages. In parallel, therefore, to the conflation of technical advancement with a

[29] Satz, "Typewriter, Pianola, Slate, Phonograph," 38.
[30] Satz, "Typewriter, Pianola, Slate, Phonograph," 42.
[31] Satz "Typewriter, Pianola, Slate, Phonograph," 41.
[32] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 218.

diminishment of touch that direct voice seems to endorse, Spiritualist practice "gives the voice back to the body and the body back to voice."[33] For Connor, the séance "refuses to consent" to an "easy inhabitation of disembodiment … even as it borrows and consolidates such effects."[34] Direct voice thus simultaneously doubles down and doubles back on the dream of disembodiment in modern acoustic media.

Compared with Satz' oxymoronic construction of a disembodied hand, the concept of a disembodied voice is perhaps familiar and seemingly uncontradictory, since mediated voices are routinely described using these terms. Both recorded and transmitted voices that are heard without visible correlation to an emitting body are understood as disembodied. Indeed, AI generated voices further complicate the relationship between mediated sounds and bodies, as they comprise sounds not only removed from their source, but without an original utterance or utterer. As easily inhabitable, to borrow Connor's terminology, as disembodiment might seem as a means to describe transmitted, recorded, or generated voices, all of these phenomena require, to varying extents, both physical bodies and a very specific idea of what a body is (and isn't)—what I called body-ness—in order to produce sounds and for these sounds to be understood as voices. Alexa also, despite assertions that it has no physical body, relies on labouring bodies to ensure its functioning and on a projection of body-ness to cultivate meaningful interactions with its users. I argue that séances dramatize the ways that bodies are continually evoked, even in situations predicated upon their absence.

While I find Connor's invitation to consider the ways that séances simultaneously reify and unravel the dream of disembodiment an immensely fruitful one, his analysis overlooks what

[33] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 222.
[34] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 223.

makes disembodiment desirable in the first place. What does untouched-ness do in a séance to lend credence to Spiritualist beliefs and to the purported objectivity of psychical research? According to what logics and traditions is a disembodied voice so highly prized? It is important, particularly considering Spiritualism's origins, and continued popularity, among settlers in white North America, to consider the desire to purify a voice from touch as a Western, patriarchal, and colonial impulse. It is this very particular dream of un-encumbrance that, I argue, remains baked into the logics of contemporary technologies.

Moreover, Connor's analysis fails to acknowledge that, within and beyond séances, disembodiment is not inhabitable in the same way for all (non)bodies. The ways that the bodies of mediums are understood to intervene in or abstain from the production of independent voices are articulated in highly gendered terms. Indeed, Connor's description of Margery as "the most spectacularly bodily of twentieth-century mediums" distinguishes her from a predominantly male cohort of well-known direct voice mediums in the early 20th century.[35] For all that Connor broadly argues for an understanding of direct voice that re-affirms the body within even seemingly untouched sound, his dismissal of Margery's telekinetic and ectoplasmic materializations, which often paralleled and supported direct voice, as "rather anachronistic in their extravagance"[36] does little to critique the ways that gender informed perceptions of mediums' role and abilities. Further, Connor's analogy between the role of direct voice mediums and telephone operators fails to account for the part that gender seemingly plays in his designations regarding what forms of mechanical labour are considered active or passive, skilled or unskilled, or more or less embodied. Indeed, Connor seems to re-enact the ways that gender is

[35] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 216.
[36] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 216.

discursively invoked to either invalidate or lend prestige to Spiritualist practice when he declares that:

> "If the increased passivity of the female medium in the facilitation of the direct voice corresponds to the generalization of the passive female function as telephone operator, the increasing technologization of the phenomenon, along with the reputation it gained for being the most technically demanding form of mediumship, seems from the First World Ward onwards also to have encouraged the increased identification of male mediums with the direct voice."[37]

Although Connor briefly acknowledges that telephone operators "required a set of phatic protocols and disciplines of response," [38] in emphasizing this idealized "passive female function" he glosses over the physical skill and stress associated with operating a switchboard, as well as the degree to which telephone companies understood voicing as skill cultivated through physical training. [39] Furthermore, the fact that the cultural figuration of the lady telephonist was premised upon the imagined body of a white, middle-class operator also goes unacknowledged in this account.[40] Connor therefore seems to accept, and indeed re-affirm, feminization and technologization as opposite poles, with direct voice understood as varyingly virtuosic depending on the gender of the medium practicing it.

This chapter therefore seeks to take up Connor's claim that the séance invests in and re-circulates the promise of disembodiment associated with media technologies, but "also discloses and depends on the reparatory reifications [of the body] which are already effected by such

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[37] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 215-216.
[38] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 215-216.
[39] For a thorough analysis of the training manuals, fitness programmes, physical check-ups, and evaluations underwent by women telephonists in the early 20th century, see Elinor Carmi, "Taming Noisy Women: Bell Telephone's Female Switchboard Operators as a Noise Source," *Media History* 21, no. 3 (2015): 313–27.
[40] See Venus Green, "The 'Lady' Telephone Operator: Gendering Whiteness in the Bell System, 1900–70," in *Racializing Class, Classifying Race*, ed. Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2000), 57-86; and Kenneth Lipartito, "When Women Were Switches: Technology, Work, and Gender in the Telephone Industry, 1890-1920," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (1994): 1074–1111.

technologies."[41] In doing so, I attend to the function of gender, race, and ability that Connor overlooks in his understanding of the ways that body-ness not only sticks but proliferates in the construction of (non)bodies. Indeed, disembodiment is just as plural and particular as embodiment. I furthermore attend to the perceptual frames that make untouched sound desirable, to the hierarchies of the senses imposed in pursuit of "disembodied" objectivity, and the mechanisms by which body-ness is re-inscribed through taxonomies of difference. The two proceeding sections will highlight different constructions of (non)bodies within séance practices, examining how the preoccupation with proving the disembodied-ness of direct voice relies upon, and engenders new forms of, body-ness. Firstly (3.1), investigations of direct voice mediumship placed rigorous demands upon the physical bodies in the séance room, necessitating distinct practices of physical discipline as well as intimate touches between mediums, sitters, and investigators. Secondly (3.2-3.3), investigating independent voices relied upon deductive techniques premised on the belief that bodily traits can be reliably heard even in untouched voices. Examining such listening practices, particularly the racialization of spirit voices, reveals a preoccupation with, and particular construction of, difference in the absence of physical speaking bodies. By unpacking the complex and contradictory mechanisms for constructing (non)bodies in the séance, I lay the ground for further questioning about what contemporary voice interfaces produce as they denounce touch and the body.

### 3.1 Voice Machines

Given the elevated status of direct voice as evidence of spirit, and the desire to gather this evidence by objective and infallible means, investigators carried out extensive tests of the

[41] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 223.

untouched-ness of the vocal manifestations that came through in Margery's mediumship. Investigators devised a series of experiments, often using bespoke measuring apparatuses, to assess the independence of the voices that came through during Margery's séances, particularly that of her frequent spirit control Walter. During these early experiments, Margery was called upon to fill her mouth with water in order to arrest her vocal apparatus and affirm that she was not producing the voice herself. According to Bird, Walter was heard to clearly exclaim "Well, well, well!" while Margery's mouth was full.[42] At the first attempt of this test, the volume of water was not properly recorded before she filled and emptied her mouth; therefore, the experiment was deemed inconclusive. At a later date, however, steps were taken to measure the water in a glass and confirm that Margery expelled the same amount that she took in. During this same sitting, a second experiment was undertaken in which all the sitters present consented to filling their mouths with water. Walter's voice was once again heard, after which "all showed that the water was still in their mouths … by ejecting it in full view of the others."[43] Later tests "required that every mouth should be controlled by the superimposed hand of a next-door neighbour."[44] Bird's account details the placement of each sitter's hand on the face of another, in order to detect any movement or respiration to which Walter's voice might be attributed. In this séance, Bird sat with his own palm placed over Margery's closed mouth, "so close that at all times [he] could count Margery's respiration, so close that when using his right hand, thumb up, he had trouble keeping this out of her eyes and nose."[45] Daniel Frost Comstock, another psychical researcher who investigated Margery, described pressing his hands over her mouth and

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[42] Bird, *Margery*, 77.
[43] Bird, *Margery*, 80.
[44] Mark W. Richardson, "The Voice Machine: Experiments Proving the Independence of the Control's (Walter's) Voice," in *Margery, Harvard, Veritas: A Study in Psychics*, ed. Mark W. Richardson, Charles S. Hill, Alfred W. Martin, S. Ralph Harlow, Joseph De Wyckhoff, and L.R.G. Crandon (Boston, MA: Blanchard Printing Co., 1925), 95.
[45] Bird, *Margery*, 301.

that of another sitter "so hard I must have hurt them."[46] The tests, pre-occupied with the supposed disembodiment of spirit voice, therefore staged intimate, indecorous, and even painful encounters among séance participants in the name of this scientific pursuit.

Nonetheless, investigators concluded that these manual tests were flawed due to their reliance on the reporting of the sitters and lack of decisive metrics. As Bird describes, "a mechanical mouth-control of some sort, applied to all mouths in the room, is the only hopeful means of attempting finality on this delicate question."[47] In pursuit of more instrumental means to verify independence of Walter's voice, Dr. Mark W. Richardson—a dedicated member of Margery's circle—devised and built what he called "the voice machine" in order to control the vocal apparatuses of the sitters and register any movements of their lips or tongue. If the machine indicated no such movements, and vocal phenomena was still heard, Richardson inferred that "the occurrence of any voice must be ascribed to supernormal vocal organs."[48] The machine comprised a glass U-tube filled half full with water, such that a cork marked with a strip of luminous paint (for visibility in the dark) could float in each arm of the tube [Figure 11]. The glass U-tube was connected to a reservoir bottle via a rubber tube "armored with metal" rendering it "incompressible" and therefore immune to tampering.[49] Up to six additional armored rubber tubes, depending on the number of sitters participating in the test, could be connected to the reservoir bottle and outfitted with a blown-glass mouthpiece [Figure 12] perforated with several small holes (indicated in Richardson's diagram by the letters *e* and *f*). Sitters were

[46] Richardson, "The Voice Machine," 95.
[47] J. Malcolm Bird, "Dr. Richardson's Voice Control Machine," in *Margery, Harvard, Veritas: A Study in Psychics*, ed. Mark W. Richardson, Charles S. Hill, Alfred W. Martin, S. Ralph Harlow, Joseph DeWyckhoff, and L.R.G. Crandon (Boston, MA: Blanchard Printing Co., 1925), 103.
[48] Richardson, "The Voice Machine," 96.
[49] Richardson, "The Voice Machine," 97.

instructed to press their lips and tongue firmly against the *e* perforations while blowing into the main opening of the mouthpiece, which caused the water levels in the U-tube to shift. When the luminous corks indicated an inequality between the water levels in the arms of the U-tube, sitters were instructed to seal the *f* hole at the end of the mouth piece with their tongue, thereby maintaining the pressure in the U-tube and causing the water level to remain static.

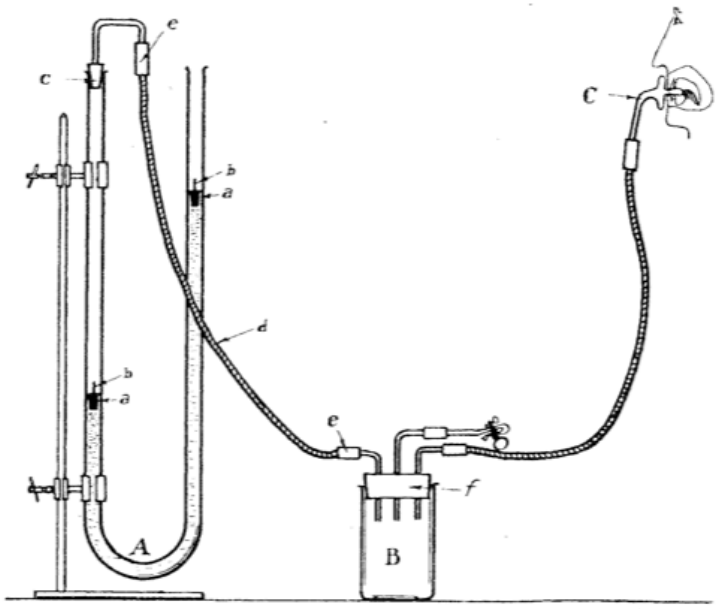


FIGURE 1. — DR. RICHARDSON'S VOICE-CONTROL APPARATUS.
(A), the U-tube; (B), the reservoir bottle; (C), one of the mouthpieces; (a, a), cork floats; (b, b), luminous markers; (c), rubber cork; (d), flexible tube, armored with metal; (e), rubber gas-pipe tip; (f), rubber cork.

Figure 11: Illustration of Dr. Richardson's voice machine. Published in *Margery, Harvard, Veritas* (1925).

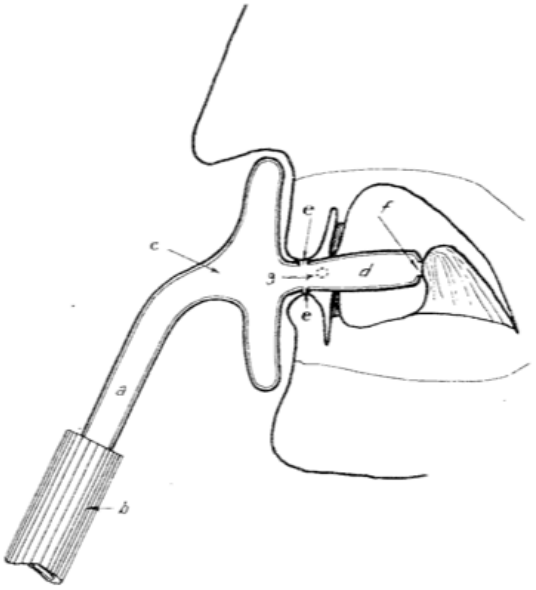


FIGURE 2. — DETAILED VIEW OF THE GLASS MOUTH-PIECE.

(a), tube connection; (b), rubber gas-pipe tip; (c), hollow disk or collar preventing entire unit from entering mouth; (d), nipple end; (e, e), holes controlling lips; (f), hole controlling tongue; (g), projection on side of shank, preventing a rubber sheath of any sort from scaling the lip-holes. The entire unit, from the tube connection (a) up, is blown in a single piece. It is entirely hollow, as the double-lined outer walls in the sketch indicate.

Figure 12: Illustration of Dr. Richardson's voice machine. Published in *Margery, Harvard, Veritas* (1925).

As Richardson explained, "under these conditions, any appreciable movement of the lips or tongue-tip of any sitter will release the air pressure and the column of water in the free arm of the U-tube will fall, carrying with it the luminously marked float."[50] Although the mouthpiece did not make it entirely impossible for participants to make any sort of sound—Bird suggests that one could "hum the consonant *m*" or, with practice, utter "a guttural *k,*" "a heavily breathed *t*," and "muffled, vowel-like noise of indeterminate character"[51]—the machine dramatically restricted the sitters ability to vocalize. If a clear speaking voice was heard in the séance room while the float remained steady, therefore, it was understood that it could not have been produced by any of the sitters. "Thus the proof has been forthcoming," Richardson writes, "that

[50] Richardson, "The Voice Machine," 99.
[51] Bird, "Dr. Richardson's Voice Control Machine," 104.

Walter's voice is independent of any vocal organ normally present in the séance room."[52] By otherwise occupying the mouths and lips of those in the room and registering any movements that might signal voicing, the voice machine guaranteed that Walter's voice was produced by some other agency. This particular technique constructs the body through its restraint, thus affirming the possibility of disembodied voicing more broadly.

FIGURE 3. — THE APPARATUS IN USE.
Dr. Richardson at the left, Margery at the right.

Figure 13: Photo of the voice machine in use by Dr. Richardson (left) and Margery (right). Published in *Margery, Harvard, Veritas* (1925).

[52] Richardson, "The Voice Machine," 99.

Part of the efficacy of the machine was attributed to its extreme sensitivity; as Bird describes "the slightest release of air, the slightest failure to maintain a tight seal over all three openings, results in the instant and precipitate collapse of the upper float."[53] The machine's responsiveness in registering any aural movements guaranteed that it could not be manipulated to fraudulent ends. Although initially devised for use with a full circle of five or six sitters, the susceptibility of the machine to slippages meant larger group tests rarely transpired without the accidental collapse of the air pressure. [54] It therefore proved more fruitful to conduct tests in which the voice machine was used by the medium and only one other sitter, who was responsible for holding the medium's hands throughout the duration of the test as further assurance that there was no tampering with the machine[55] [Figure 13]. Even in the simplified two-person tête-à-tête version of the test, slippages and failures were still prone to occur. [56] Bird describes the difficulty of holding the mouthpiece for a period of several minutes without accidentally losing one's oral grip and causing the air pressure to collapse. The glass quickly became wet and slippery, therefore difficult to hold in place without slipping; therefore "one must bite down on the glass, almost painfully; and then clamp the lips down over the holes with equal emphasis."[57] The voice machine therefore demanded a very challenging and particular embouchure on the part of its users. Indeed, Bird describes practicing his oral technique with Margery prior to a séance—promptly closing the tongue hole after exhaling to raise the float, and then breathing only through the nose while holding the cumbersome mouthpiece in place in order to maintain a seal on the mouthpiece for more than a few seconds at a time.[58]

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[53] Bird, "Dr. Richardson's Voice Control Machine," 103.
[54] Bird, "Dr. Richardson's Voice Control Machine," 105.
[55] Richardson, "The Voice Machine," 101.
[56] Bird, "Dr. Richardson's Voice Control Machine," 105.
[57] Bird, "Dr. Richardson's Voice Control Machine," 104.
[58] Bird, "Dr. Richardson's Voice Control Machine," 105.

I recount the mechanics of the voice machine, and the postures and techniques that it initiates, in such detail in order to underscore the ways that this device, which is meant to affirm the independence of the spirit voices from a particular human body, is so demanding of the bodies in the room. Although the voice machine takes the place of the manual tests described above, in which sitters' hands act as both physical restraints on the medium's mouth and a means of detecting movement or breath though tactile sensing, the instrument nonetheless requires precise physical choreography. Indeed, the need for the sitter and the medium to hold one another's hands suggests that touch is still important in guaranteeing the veracity of the results generated via this hands-free instrument. Margery's circle thus engages in very particular bodily techniques in order to *not* produce a voice, in order to ensure their silence and authenticate the disembodiment of any vocalizations. Séances structured around the voice machine introduce practices that work with the body in order to disavow it.

In this regard, the voice machine might be understood as an oral extension to the physical controls imposed upon mediums' bodies in order to allay doubts about the veracity of séance phenomena. Indeed, as psychical researchers sought to instate a methodical scientific approach to spirit phenomena, such procedures and restraints were considered necessary "to eradicate external forces that would skew experimental results."[59] Throughout her mediumship, therefore, it was common practice for Margery's hands to be bound,[60] or for the sitters on either side of her in the circle to maintain a hold on her arms and legs for the duration of the séance.[61][62] In keeping, however, with a belief that mechanical and automatic controls were more reliable, longstanding tactile methods for restricting the medium's movement in the darkened séance

[59] Robertson, *Science of the Séance*, 86.
[60] Bird, *Margery,* 145.
[61] Bird, *Margery*, 174.
[62] For a more detailed account of restraints used in Margery's séances, see Robertson, *Science of the Séance,* 87-91.

room, such as holding hands in the circle, were considered insufficient.[63] Investigators therefore sought out more robust and intricate means of restricting and confining the bodies of mediums that did not rely on tactile perception.


Figure 14: Harry Houdini in the box he designed for tests with Margery (c. 1925).

Psychical researcher Harry Price enumerates several strategies for restraining mediums, including being "sewn up in bags, handcuffed, nailed down in boxes, trussed up like a roast fowl," tied to a chair and locked in cages.[64] Margery submitted to a similarly rigorous means of confinement during a series of highly publicized investigations undertaken by a committee

[63] Price, *Fifty Years of Psychical Research*, 240.
[64] Price, *Fifty Years of Psychical Research*, 243.

assembled by *Scientific American* magazine*,* which included Bird as well as famed magician and skeptic of Spiritualism Harry Houdini. For this series of séances, Houdini provided "a portentous box, into which the lady was to be shut and fastened in with eight padlocks, leaving her arms extended at two side holes and her head at the top"[65] [Figure 14]. By encasing and immobilizing Margery's body, the box promised a more reliable means of eliminating the possibility of fraudulence than merely holding hands.

Furthermore, investigators often insisted upon physically examining Margery's body and clothing in keeping with the scrutiny that psychical researchers sought to impose on Spiritualist practices. As Price argued, for ideal scientific conditions to be met "every body orifice [of the medium] should be explored by a medical man,"[66] essentially sanctioning sexual assault within the institution of psychical investigation. Such thorough and invasive criteria were not consistently met during Margery's séance (indeed Margery's husband, Dr. LeRoi Crandon, initially refused to allow investigators to examine her internally), but her body and clothing were often inspected.[67] Dr. T.G. Hamilton's account of the investigative procedures upon Margery's visit to his home circle in Winnipeg describes requiring her to remove all her clothes in view of Hamilton's wife, Lillian, who confirmed that "there was nothing concealed about Margery's person."[68] Margery proceeded to conduct the séance wearing only a bathrobe.[69] With regard to the voice machine, investigators conducted an in-depth examination of Margery's mouth and

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[65] Richardson et al. eds., *Margery, Harvard, Veritas*, 11. For a more detailed account of the construction of the box, and Houdini's committed belief in the fraudulence of Margery's mediumship, see Harry Houdid, *Houdini Exposes the Tricks Used by the Boston Medium Margery to Win the $2500 Prize Offered by the Scientific American* (New York: Adams Press Publishers, 1924).
[66] Price, *Fifty Years of Psychical Research*, 246.
[67] Robertson, *Science of the Séance,* 90.
[68] Hamilton, "Margery in Winnipeg," 559.
[69] Such preparations were common practice in séances convened by the Hamilton circle, where the medium, Mary Marshall, also demonstrated a facility with direct voice.

nose immediately before and after each use,[70] ensuring that no material that might impede the functioning of the machine had been secreted away in a bodily cavity. The reliability of the voice machine as an indicator of the genuine disembodiment of spirit voices was therefore contingent upon invasive and systematic scrutiny of the body of the medium.

In her thoughtful analysis of the gendered dynamics at play in the scientific procedures characteristic of early 20th century séances, Beth Robertson draws upon Donna Haraway's concept of the modest witness in order to account for the ways the psychical researchers rested their claims to objective knowledge "upon the ability to distance oneself from the body, which only men could attain."[71] Indeed, Haraway describes the "specific, European, masculine, scientific form of the virtue of modesty"[72] as one that renders the male scientist transparent, guaranteeing his trustworthiness and exempting his claims from "biasing embodiment."[73] The scientific apparatus constructed through modest witnessing might therefore be understood as a technology of gender, insofar as it is instrumental in crafting and perpetuating gendered ways of understanding what passes for truth.[74] Returning to Connor's description of Margery as a "spectacularly bodily" medium,[75] I therefore wish to suggest that this bodily-ness is constituted by the investigative apparatus which, in seeking evidence of discarnate personalities by mechanical means, constructs the bodies present in the séance room as objects of enquiry. Not only do psychical researchers seek to adopt a modest stance, by which their own "unmarked" embodiment goes unremarked, but in this self-effacement they mark the body of the medium—a dynamic that goes unquestioned in Connor's account.

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[70] Richardson, "The Voice Machine," 99.
[71] Robertson, *Science of the Séance,* 91-92.
[72] Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse*, 23.
[73] Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse,* 24.
[74] Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse,* 28.
[75] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 216.

While the voice machine might be understood to align with psychical research protocols in so far as it comprises a control that guarantees the untouched-ness of spirit voices, it also creates a rupture in prescribed séance procedure. A crucial feature of direct voice mediumship is the medium's ability to participate in conversations with the voices that they manifest, whereas automatic voice requires that the medium relinquish their vocal apparatus to spirit controls.[76] The voice machine, however, negated this possibility. By creating a scenario in which all participants could not speak, the device further nullifies the dialogic exchange between sitters and spirits that characterized voice-oriented séances. The technical intervention of the voice machine shifts the communicative distribution of the séance such that the typical question and answer format is replaced with that of a monologue. Since the voice machine occupied the mouths of the sitters, Walter's speech necessarily became a one-way oration, since no one in the room was able to speak back. In this regard, the sociality of the séance changes in ways that emphasize the technical elements of voicing over intersubjective ones.

The voice machine's intervention also impedes established modes of record keeping in séances. Arresting the voices of participating sitters and investigators negates the possibility of using a dictaphone or stenographer, which had become customary in investigations of Margery's séances and was understood as a more accurate means of documenting spirit phenomena than accounts based on sitters' recollections after the fact.[77] In one such recounting after a test with the voice machine, Bird confessed that he didn't recall what Walter had said and affirmed only that he audibly spoke while the machine was in use.[78] The test was nonetheless considered a success, since it was thought to prove the discarnate origins of the voice. Indeed, the séances that

[76] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 217.
[77] Bird, "Dr. Richardson's Voice Control Machine," 106.
[78] Bird, "Dr. Richardson's Voice Control Machine," 108.

unfold around the voice machine seem to prioritize the manifestation of direct voice as such, rather than any particular messages or evidence conveyed via the voice. In anticipation of what would become a truism of modern information theory, the fact of information transfer becomes more important than the content of what is being transmitted.[79] The voice machine therefore produces a situation in which the disavowal of the body is prioritized to such a degree that it changes what voices are meant to mean and what comprises communication.

### 3.2 Audile techniques

Robertson suggests that the pursuit of objectivity and empiricism in psychical research leads to a hierarchy of the senses with regard to assessing séance phenomena; vision and hearing, in contrast to smell and taste, "were ascribed a higher status because they remained distant from the body and were therefore believed to be truly objective."[80] In this context, hearing is prized as a "disembodied," and thus more reliable, sense[81]—a claim that, I argue, merits further interrogation. The established conviction in psychical research that hearing is a more objective means of discerning and assessing séance phenomena might be understood in relation to "a distinctively modern set of practical orientations toward listening"[82] that Jonathan Sterne calls audile technique. This orientation is characterized by the instrumentalization of listening as a technical skill and way of knowing connected to rationality. As Sterne describes, "audile techniques articulated listening and the ear to logic, analytic thought, industry, professionalism,

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[79] A different approach to the problems of (dis)embodiment that I outline in this chapter might foreground the distinction between information and its material markers and infrastructures that has been extrapolated from information theory and cybernetics. See Bruce Clarke, "Information," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010): 157-171, and N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For a more detailed reading of spiritualist practice through this theoretical framework, see Galvan, "The Victorian Post-Human."

[80] Robertson, *Science of the Séance,* 92.

[81] Robertson, *Science of the Séance,* 92.

[82] Sterne, *The Audible Past,* 95.

capitalism, individualism, and mastery."[83] Although primarily developed in scientific, medical, mediated communication industries, audile technique, which bestowed listening with considerable cultural currency, proliferated in different contexts in the latter decades of the 19th century. Psychical researchers, therefore, likely would have understood listening in this technical way. Leaning into listening as an objective means of gathering data thus served a desire to lend respectability to investigations unfolding at the fringe of mainstream science.

Despite the affiliation between listening and reason implied by audile technique, it does not follow that listening comprises a disembodied mode of perception. On the contrary, audile technique refers to "specialized practices, rather than inherent capacities;"[84] such techniques comprised learned skills, cultivated through physical education, whether through institutional training or repeated practice.[85] To insist upon the separate-ness of listening from the body, as Robertson infers was the case in psychical research, is to adopt the stance of the modest witness whose perceptions are "unpolluted"[86] by the body. Considering listening in the séance as a mode of audile technique, therefore, is a way to dispel the myth of transparent listening, and to ask instead ask how this practice constructs the body in such a way that affords its instrumentalization. Both the concept of modest witnessing and audile technique are helpful in naming the specificity of the practices of listening to which Spiritualists and psychical researchers subscribe—an unmarked listening positionality[87] invested in whiteness and patriarchy. Moreover, to acknowledge audile techniques as such—as a specific and cultivated orientation rather than natural faculty—is to suggest that other listening orientations are possible.

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[83] Sterne, *The Audible Past,* 95.
[84] Sterne, *The Audible Past,* 96.
[85] Sterne, *The Audible Past,* 92.
[86] Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse*, 32.
[87] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 37-38.

Although listening in the séance digresses from some of the characteristics that Sterne takes to be definitive of modern audile technique (as will be elaborated below), I nonetheless consider the séance as an arena in which a technical conception of listening is not only at work, but that places particular demands and thereby modifies the meaning of listening as such. The séance not only cultivates a listening orientation towards gathering evidence in the darkened séance room, but also advances a series of beliefs about what can in fact be discerned through listening. Indeed, listening in the séance is a crucial means to detect, interrogate, and classify body-ness—even in situations predicated upon the absence of bodies.

Among the sounds made meaningful through the particular orientation of listening in the séance room are those associated with amplification technologies that supported spirit vocalizations. The mediumship of William Cartheuser in particular was characterized by his prominent use of spirit trumpets—light and collapsible aluminum cones manufactured and marketed for amplifying spirit voices. Indeed, the popularity of spirit trumpets as a séance technology in the early decades of the 20th century was such that "trumpet mediumship" was widely understood as a particular genre or speciality,[88] in which Cartheuser was particularly well-practiced and adept. Cartheuser's séances typically included as many as three trumpets, one of which was adorned with luminous radium paint such that its opening was discernable in the dark while the other trumpets remained invisible. At the start of the séance, the trumpets were placed on the floor in the centre of the circle, alongside other accoutrements including flowers and a dish of water.[89] Such deliberate and ritualized placement of the trumpets out of arms reach of the medium, presuming he remained seated in his chair, served as a means to guarantee that the ensuing phenomena, both vocal and telekinetic, was executed without tactile manipulation.

[88] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 213.
[89] See Chapter 2, 13.

Once the lights were extinguished, the trumpets began to levitate and spin rapidly in the air, ostensibly directed by spirit agencies and without the tactile manipulation by the medium or sitters. Spirit voices were then heard speaking through the trumpets, sounding out from different corners of the room. Not only did trumpet mediumship therefore deliver vocalizations at a remove from the body of the medium, but it did so via touch-less technologies.

Although Jenny Pincock's home circle, where Cartheuser acted as the resident medium, claimed to emphasize the value of "personal evidence and teachings" conveyed via the voice over more spectacular physical phenomena,[90] her accounts nonetheless describe the precision and variety of the trumpet's movements, moving at times rapidly and frenetically and at others languidly and deliberately. On one occasion a luminous trumpet was detected drifting "slowly and peacefully" in a far corner of the ceiling;[91] at another sitting, the trumpet conducted the sitters in song by moving "in slow beautiful curves, with definite intelligent appreciation of the tempo."[92] When the energetic conditions of the séance dipped, the trumpets registered this shift by seemingly losing control and "whizzing" around the room.[93]

Pincock describes the trumpets' expressive patterns with remarkable detail, given that the séances, of course, transpired in darkness. The luminous bands painted onto the trumpet certainly offered some remedy to the problem of observing phenomena in conditions of reduced visibility, yet the sitters almost certainly relied on senses other than sight to determine what was unfolding around them. Whereas modern audile technique in Sterne's conception relied upon the separation and autonomy of the senses,[94] séance practices relied upon a method of multi-sensory

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[90] Pincock, *Trails of Truth*, 30.
[91] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 126.
[92] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 30.
[93] Séance notes, 1 July 1928, SCA94-GA64-4-96, Maines Pincock Family fonds, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.
[94] Sterne, *The Audible Past,* 93.

triangulation. Despite the denigration of touch in the sensory hierarchy espoused in psychical research, and the rarefication of direct voice as untouched sound, records suggest that sound and touch were often assessed in tandem as a means of understanding invisible séance phenomena. Indeed, for Connor, trumpets are among the crucial means by which séance practices "supplement[ed] the disembodied voice with touch."[95] Accounts of Cartheuser's séances describe frequent contacts between trumpets and the bodies in the room, tapping on shoulders, legs and feet, with investigators remarking upon the exactness with which the trumpet seemed able to touch sitters in the darkness.[96] McComas described receiving "a friendly little bump on the top of my head by way of repartee," as well as the great accuracy with which the trumpet "gently touch[ed] one sitter's eyeglasses."[97] During it's more unwieldy moments, the trumpet narrowly evaded striking sitters; "one could not help wondering why some nose was not injured" as it spun rapidly around the circle.[98] The incredible dexterity with which the trumpets seemed to move and touch sitters without any form of manual control was itself considered evidence of psychic phenomena.

Sitters also attuned their ears to the sounds that accompanied the movement of the trumpets around the room in order to locate their position in space. Pincock recounts the "terrific speed" with which the trumpets swept around the séance room, creating a sound like "a mighty rushing wind."[99] She also describes being able to hear the trumpets dip down into the center of the room and make contact with the dish of water also placed on the floor.[100] Moreover, careful listening in the context of trumpet mediumship was understood to require attending to sonic phenomena

[95] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 218.
[96] Carrington, *The World of Psychic Research*, 76-77.
[97] McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With*, 35-36.
[98] McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With*, 35.
[99] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 30.
[100] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 124.

that exceeded the semantic content of spirit speech. Whizzing, blowing, and crashing sounds were also considered evidential. Listening for the non-vocal sounds associated with the trumpets was a crucial tactic of discerning the means by which spirit voices were produced, of accessing the technical infrastructures and mechanisms of the séance. Moreover, the specific listening techniques cultivated in the séance room hinged upon the belief that the human auditory apparatus was capable of locating sounds in the dark, without a visual referent. As Bird described, "the whole question" of the veracity of trumpet mediumship "hangs on this point."[101] Indeed, Bird's claim that "any anatomist will tell you that you are able to locate sound with the ears alone"[102] indicates the ways that psychical researchers sought to affirm the accuracy of their reporting on séances through an instrumental understanding of the capacities of the listening body.

Pincock's reporting also demonstrates the ways that the perceived ability to pin-point the precise origin of sounds was applied to voices, as well the affective implications of the spirit proximities that voices were understood to signal. Indeed, the movement of the trumpets created an environment in which voices were heard all around the room, often at a remove from the body of the medium and at varying distances from the bodies of the sitters. Séance notes abound with descriptions in which participants locate voices sounding out from the floor, in motion around the circle, and by the face or ear of different sitters, with Pincock describing the way that "with the greatest nicety [the trumpet] would float up alongside one's ear and a faint voice could be heard whispering through it."[103] For Pincock, who, like many practitioners, was drawn to Spiritualism following a series of tragic personal losses, the discernible closeness of spirit voice

[101] Bird, *Margery*, 297.
[102] Bird, *Margery*, 298.
[103] McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With*, 35.

was seemingly as important as the content spirit speech. She describes hearing her daughter Jane's voice as it "fluttered over my fingers" while playing the piano, [104] as well as being able to detect when the spirit of her husband "was beside me singing."[105] Such descriptions foreground not only the intimacy and affective charge of such vocal encounters, predicated upon the ability to audibly measure proximity, but also affirm the Spiritualist belief that, in the context of the séance, spirits are both spatially and temporally present. Insofar as voice signals the location of spirits within the séance room, is it evidence of the contemporaneous-ness and live-ness of the spirit world. The ability to register the location of spirit (non)bodies with precision lent further credence to their presence.

Despite the sense of proximity and intimacy associated with such vocal encounters, as well as the physical touches bestowed upon sitters by floating trumpets, the careful listening that transpired in direct voice séances was nonetheless attuned to verifying the untouched-ness of vocal sounds. By precisely locating the spatial origin point for spirit voices, investigators sought to affirm that this point of utterance did not correspond with the vocal apparatuses of any of the bodies in the séance room. Accounts from Cartheuser's mediumship demonstrate the ways that sitters cross-referenced the spatial coordinates signaled by spirit voices with the audibly discernable locations of the trumpets in order to affirm the medium's non-involvement in their production. Indeed, séance notes often report when the medium's physical presence was audible in ways that signalled his location; as notes from Pincock's circle describe, he could be heard "talking and laughing or clearing his throat thus letting us know that he did not leave his position."[106] Such vocalizations, which were attributed to Cartheuser's vocal apparatus, therefore

[104] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 154.
[105] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 92.
[106] Séance Notebook, 1930.

provided an audible bodily anchor against which other vocalizations could be measured in terms of their distance or proximity, thereby affirming their independence. In this regard, the séance constructs the body as a static technical object, rather than a locus of experience; Cartheuser's vocalizations are not expressive, only indicative of his proper functionality within the apparatus of the séance.

Furthermore, researcher's attention to the medium's vocalizations construct the body as an abstraction, as a baseline against which direct voices could be measured according to their fidelity or lack therefore. The greater the audible digression between a spirit voice and that of the medium, the more convincing and evidential. Discerning such differences therefore required that investigators understood what the medium's authentic voice sounded like, so that they could listen for traces of it within spirit voices. This practice of attunement is described most vividly with regard to Cartheuser's mediumship, with several investigators noting that he had a cleft palate that resulted in "a severe impediment in his speech."[107] Since Cartheuseur was thought to be unable to "speak without [this] peculiarity showing itself,"[108] voices in the séance room that did not possess a "pronounced lisp"[109] were more readily accepted as belonging to spirits. Participants therefore understood Cartheuser's voice to be indelibly marked by his physical body, and that the absence of such audible markings assured a voice's disembodiment. Indeed, accounts of direct voice manifestations in Cartheuser's séances frame such manifestations in transcendent terms, with spirit voices by-passing Cartheuseur's bodily impairment to achieve greater clarity. As psychical researcher Henry Clay McComas described in detail:

> "Before the séance everyone had an opportunity to talk to Mr. Cartheuser and no one could fail to notice how badly he articulated. Those who had made any study of the voice and expression noted at once that the harelip gave the characteristic

[107] Carrington, *The World of Psychic Research,* 68.
[108] Dudley, "Miscellaneous Episodes of Late 1926," 550.
[109] Dudley, "Miscellaneous Episodes of Late 1926," 552.

> blurring of the labials. This was very apparent. Added to that the difficulty he had in pronouncing his gutterals made his speech so unusual that no one failed to remark it. However, when the voice of "Dr. Andrews" [sic] came through the trumpet no one could detect any defects in his articulation […] His voice was as deliberate and clear as anyone could wish."[110]

McComas thus invokes the specificity of Cartheuser's body, rendered all the more weighty in its pathologization.[111] By stressing the marked-ness of Cartheuser's voice, such accounts tether the voice to the body via physical impairment, thereby casting the untouched-ness of spirit voices in high relief. Moreover, investigator's descriptions of Cartheuser's voice are provided in tandem with details of his physicality and personality more broadly, as if his speech might be understood as a further indication that he was, as McComas described "rather undersized," as well as "rather dull and stupid."[112] Such descriptions seem to exclude Cartheuser from masculine self-possession, attesting to a passive disposition that qualifies him as an ideal medium.

In addition to listening vigilantly for "Cartheuser-characteristics"[113] within purportedly independent voices that came through during his mediumship, investigators relied on technical interventions to discern and measure whether Cartheuser was using his own vocal organs to produce the voices that came through. McComas, for instance, devised a bespoke stethoscope with a "tambour" that he affixed with surgical tape to Cartheuser's neck, such that he could "hear his carotid artery and the sounds in his larynx as he breathed. The faintest whisper was easily audible and his speaking voice very loud."[114] The absence of bodily sound through the

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[110] See McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With*, 36-37.
[111] This account also resonates with prominent Western discourses that situate disability as being at odds with, or excluded from, subjectivity. See Margrit Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). For a more specific reflection on voice as indice of physical impairment, see Jonathan Sterne, *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).
[112] McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With*, 31-32.
[113] Carrington, *The World of Psychic Research,* 69.
[114] McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With*, 50.

stethoscope was therefore meant to confirm the independence of any simultaneous vocalizations heard around the room. This example demonstrates the ways that technologies further extend the technical conception of hearing already at work in psychical investigations. Séances thus align with the orientation of modern audile techniques more broadly in that listening is understood in a diagnostic capacity, as "a privileged technique of empirical examination."[115] Furthermore, within this paradigm voice was figured as a "timbral index of interior states of the body,"[116] a sonic imprint that could be made legible through skilled listening. Investigators ascribed to a belief that voices communicated beyond the content of speech, that they inevitably betrayed physical traits of the speaking body. The séance therefore produces, and is predicated upon, a construction of voice as an index of material, yet unseen phenomena, whether concealed in the darkness of the séance room or inside the body. The persistence of a conception of voice as rooted and reliable in a situation predicated upon the presence of voices without bodily roots defines the paradox of disembodiment active within the séance.

### 3.3 Acousmatic questions, or listening for (non)bodies

The presumed legibility of voice is also at stake in the process of assessing and naming the myriad spirit voices that come through during séances, distinguishing them not only from the voice of the medium but from one another. Over the course of a séance, numerous distinct personalities manifest and speak, including, most predominantly, deceased friends and relatives of the sitters. As each distinct spirit makes itself known in the séance room via voice, without any discernible visual referent, sitters apply techniques of listening in order to glean who is

[115] Sterne, *The Audible Past,* 122.
[116] Sterne, *The Audible Past,* 122.

coming through. The séance, therefore, might be considered a ritual heavily invested in what Nina Sun Eidsheim calls the "acousmatic question": "who is this?"[117] For Eidsheim, this comprises "the foundational question asked in the act of listening to a human voice," and its ubiquity is founded upon a widely-held assumption that one should be able to identify a source for a sound, even in the absence of a visible or known source. The acousmatic question presumes that "voice is stable and knowable,"[118] and that fine-grained assessments regarding identity and character can be made through careful listening. Indeed, Eidsheim borrows Sterne's concept of audile technique to connote the "internalization of the disciplining of ears"[119] that affords the classifications of voices according to culturally codified standards and characteristics. Eidsheim advances a critical perspective that "does not assume any indexical connection between voices and bodies,"[120] noting that essentializing claims regarding the audibility of physical characteristics inaccurately reduce the complex event of voicing. Yet a belief in the answerability of the acousmatic continues to structure the ways that voices are assessed as a source of in alienable truths about the speaker or singer: "the West's long history of entwining voice and vocal timbre with subjectivity and interiority has contributed to such truth claims remaining stagnant."[121]

The séance is an arena in which such essentializing truth claims are consistently reaffirmed. Indeed, the persistence of the belief that voice indexes bodily traits in the context of the séance, where spirit voices are irrevocably disembodied, is a testament to the cultural force and endurance of the acousmatic question. Listening practices invoked in the séance therefore

[117] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 1.
[118] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 3.
[119] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 25.
[120] Eidsheim, *The Same of Sound*, 33.
[121] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 5.

might be understood to re-inscribe body-ness, even onto untouched vocal sound. Sitters draw upon codified meanings ascribed to vocal sounds in order to assign an identity to the voices of unfamiliar spirits. Audible characteristics of spirit voices—including pitch, volume, timbre, intonation, and accent—are believed to reliably communicate physical traits and markers including age, gender, race, and ethnicity. Cartheuser, for instance, had several spirit controls who made regular and prominent appearances at his séances, including a young girl spirit called Elsie, who spoke in a "high childish soprano" and "quaint little German accent,"[122] and Dr. Anderson, who possessed a "powerful, stern yet sympathetic voice."[123] These audible distinctions made spirit voices recognizable and legible to sitters who had never encountered these personalities in their terrestrial form.

The centrality of the presumption that voices are stable indicators of age, gender, and race is most prominently displayed in séances guided by the mediumship of Thomas Lacey, in which a single sitting might have included upwards of 15 distinct personalities coming through and vocalizing. Textual descriptions from Lacey's earlier séances describe a parade of often racialized characters, ostensibly distinguished from one another by the particularity of their voices. A pair of "Hawaiian brothers," for instance, frequently appeared and sang during séances, and were identified by their "brilliant style."[124] These performances were contrasted with a "negro voice" speaking in southern dialect that followed in the same séance.[125] On another occasion, a singing spirit was described as possessing a "low bass voice … with a great

[122] McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With*, 37-38.
[123] Séance notes, 1 July 1928, Maines Pincock Family fonds.
[124] Report of Séance, 9 January 1932.
[125] Report of Séance, 9 January 1932.

deal of emotion" while performing an "old familiar negro melody."[126] Listening to audio recordings from Lacey's séances from the 1960s, which maintain the same ritual structure and preoccupation with vocal phenomena as transcribed sittings from the 1930s, further affirms the reliance on vocal tropes as markers of identity. Voices of women and children spirits are characterized by a higher pitch, whereas a raspy timbre denotes a voice belonging to an older spirit. The racialization of spirit voices also transpires through shifts in pitch, volume, speed, intonation, prosody, and accent.

While some spirits spoke loquaciously in North American or British accents, others audibly struggled to express themselves clearly in English, even slipping into what seem to be unintelligible phonetic approximations of other languages. For example, in one recording a spirit who introduces themselves as Kim Pu Song initially speaks in what the sitters agree to be Chinese, before explaining that: "give me great pleasure to come and help you … in meditation. I come help you with meditation."[127] In such instances, the spirit's vocal characteristics support the sitters' expectations regarding their role and contributions to the spiritual development of the circle. Indeed, the auditory othering of spirit voices seemed to infer a spirit's adeptness in non-Western spiritual practices, making them a useful addition to the séance. Indeed, during Lacey's early séances, Abudha Khan, a spirit often referred to only as "The Hindu," acted as a principle speaker and guide. Séance notes reported that Abudha Khan's grasp of English seemed to be improving through his frequent interactions with the circle, yet "his manner of speech suggests a

[126] Report of Séance, 20 February 1932, SCA258-GA445-12, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.
[127] Reel 2, 1960-1962.

fluency with Eastern life"[128]—an arena of knowledge to which Lacey's circle sought greater access. [129]

The variation in pitch, timbre, and accent among voices coming through in the séance was also taken as evidence that these were independent spirit utterances, rather than productions of the medium's vocal apparatus. Regarding Cartheuser's spirit control, Elsie, McComas suggested that, based on its audible characteristics alone, such a voice could not be attributed to Cartheuser's body: "it did not seem possible that Cartheuser could stretch his vocal cords to reach such high tones."[130] Such vocal manifestations therefore underscored the untouched-ness of direct voice, the "reduction in the substantial presence" of the medium compared with other modes of spirit communication. [131] The logic of direct voice, therefore, presupposes a more removed encounter with difference in that otherwise gendered and racialized spirits never inhabit or possess the body of the medium, as is the case in automatic voice or other trance-oriented practices. Daphne Brooks, for instance, examines the practice of spirit dancing as it emerged in the 1850s, in which numerous spirits manifest in rapid succession through the body of the medium in motion. As with Lacey's direct voice séances, such performances comprised a rapidly unfolding parade of characters, distinguished from one another through their adherence to gendered and racialized types and tropes. Brooks examines the vehement opposition to spirit

[128] Report of Séance, 14 October 1931, SCA258-GA445-6, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.
[129] Lacey's circle demonstrated an interest in and allegiance with esoteric traditions including Theosophy, the White Brotherhood, and Rosicrucianism, which might account for the prominence of non-Western spiritual guides in séances. For more on the theological investments of Lacey's circle see McMullin, *Anatomy of a Séance*. For more on Western esotericisms, and their often-problematic uptake of Eastern religions and philosophies, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), and Erik Reenberg Sand and Tim Rudbøg, eds. *Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).
[130] McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With*, 37.
[131] Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost," 214.

dancing in this period, with critics decrying that such practices comprised "a spectacle of miscegenous encounter … a horrifying taxonomic crisis as women, Indians, and Negroes collide and coalesce on the dance floor."[132] This mode of Spiritualist practice thus "confounds and confuses putatively impermeable racial and cultural borders"[133] as it opens up the body of the (presumably white) medium to transpersonal contacts. In this regard, Spiritualism constructs race in a very particular way: more than skin, it is as an essence that survives bodily death and can be discerned in other manifestations of body-ness.

While direct voice séances similarly construct racialized (non)bodies, they also seek to transcend the kinds of anxieties that Brooks identifies. The aforementioned conviction that direct voice signals a more advanced and credible mode of spirit communication insofar as it comprised untouched phenomena might serve a desire for racial purity. In by-passing the body of the medium, racialized contacts and comminglings are eliminated from spirit communication. The re-figuration of the medium from channel to operator affirms their self-possession in the context of the séance, banishing the intimacies and ambiguities that accompanied trance vocalizations. Spiritualists conceded that even direct voices occasionally bear audible similarities to that of the medium or to other voices they bring through; even without making use of the medium's vocal apparatus, "the physical and mental mechanism of the medium must necessarily colour and influence the character of communications, to some extent."[134] However, the degree of such colouration in direct voice was evidently negligible enough that direct voices were still believed to retain their own audible colour. Psychical researchers' investment in the ideal of

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[132] Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 14.
[133] Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 14-15.
[134] Carrington, *The World of Psychic Research,* 70.

untouched-ness is crucial to understanding direct voices as aural specimens that can somewhat neatly and reliably classified.

The racialized tropes that appeared most prominently in records from Lacey's séances are those of Indigenous spirits, with White Cloud, White Eagle, Blue Snake, Happy Wolf, Morning Star, Grey Faun, and Elk Horn among the regular cast of spirits in attendance. While Lacey's recorded séances primarily took place on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabeg, and Haundenosaunee peoples, most spirits were of seemingly unspecified tribal affiliation. Such spirit manifestations express a continuity with earlier séance practices; according to Kathryn Troy, the presence of "Indian ghosts" was a defining characteristic of Spiritualist practice from its inception.[135] In the latter decades of the 19th century, such apparitions reflected ways that "Indian-ness" was constructed as a racial category, as well as national policy debates regarding American/Indian relations.[136] Troy's work seeks to articulate the complex rendering of spirits within a reform-minded Spiritualist arena attentive to the political enfranchisement of Indigenous peoples, arguing that these spirits were "not simply utilized as servants …; they were praised as guides and instructors, helping to ensure the nation's future."[137] Sam Stoeltje, however, notes "this elevation is often contingent upon pacification," with spirits in séances signalling their acquiescence to settler conquest.[138] Indeed, Indigenous spirits seem to predominantly materialize in order to offer support for white Spiritualists' psychic development. While foregoing any kind of engagement with specific Indigenous belief systems or cosmologies (indeed the continued survival of individual self-possessed personalities after death supports Christian belief systems

[135] Troy, *The Specter of the Indian*, xv.
[136] Troy, *The Spectre of the Indian*, xviii.
[137] Troy, *The Spectre of the Indian*, xiii.
[138] Sam Stoeltje, "Specter Haunting the Study of Spiritualism," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 17, no. 1 (July 13, 2022): 141.

regarding the afterlife),[139] vague reference to Indigenous mysticism functioned, for Spiritualists, as "a usable history" that lent credence to their own practice.[140]

The abundance of "Indian ghosts," to borrow Troy's phrasing, that frequented Lacey's circle affirms that this trope remained a reliable, and usable, feature in séances well into the 20th century; as McComas described, reflecting in 1935 on his career in psychical research, "one meets altogether too many Indians at séances."[141] Dialogues that transpire throughout Lacey's séances reflect a similar construction of Indian-ness, with spirits often manifesting as boisterous, unruly, and simple-minded personalities. Yet, similar to the spirits ascribed with racialized identities described above, Indigenous spirits seemingly possessed a mystic wisdom that they were more than willing to employ in aid of the Spiritualists, or "pale face friends,"[142] who summoned them. On one occasion, the spirit Happy Wolf is heard throughout the séance, announcing his desire to help shepherd other spirits and assist them in establishing contact, including that of Mrs. Heap, the deceased mother of one of the sitters. Indeed, Mrs. Heap declared that "your Indian as has brought me through," observing that there was such a large number of Indigenous spirits in attendance that "at first, I thought I'd come into a reservation!"[143] She further described her gratitude and admiration of Happy Wolf's superior nimbleness in navigating the afterlife: "Indians in the spiritual life are such wonderful people. They have quite an ability to come through and to give power and help to others."[144] The sitters,

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[139] See Letter from T.G. Hamilton to Mrs. J.M. Robinson, 18 April 1932, Box 5, Folder 1, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.
[140] McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 73.
[141] McComas, *Ghosts I Have Talked With*, 37.
[142] Reel 19, 26 October 1962, SCA258-GA270-36b, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.
[143] Reel 4, 12 June 1962, SCA258-GA270-6, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.
[144] Reel 4, Thomas Lacey séance collection.

in dialogue with Mrs. Heap, discuss how generous Indigenous spirit guides have been towards white settlers given the injustices to which they have been subjected—"we have a lot on our conscience and to think they're doing so much for us"—as well as whether TV Westerns provided a fair representation of Indigenous people.[145] This reference to media representation suggests the degree to which Spiritualist reading and reception of spirits hinged upon accepted conventions of Indian-ness drawn from a settler cultural imaginary.

Beyond the characterization of Indigenous spirits as noble, generous, and obliging, the ways their vocal presences were perceived and assessed discloses the settler colonial listening positionality upon which the entire séance relies. Indeed, insofar as the séance comprised listening techniques oriented towards recognition, a "listening for," [146] the practice might be understood in accordance with what Dylan Robinson calls "hungry listening": it "prioritizes the capture and certainty of information over the affective feel, timbre, touch and texture of sound."[147] Furthermore, hungry listening describes a listening positionality that "privileges a recognition of palatable narratives of difference" and "orient[s] the ear towards identifying standardized features and types."[148] Certainly, such an appetite is palpable in the way that the Indigenous identity was ascribed to spirit voices in the context of a séance. Troy notes that "ethnic markers … were paramount in Spiritualist attempts to authenticate and legitimate the presence of Indian ghosts in their sitting rooms,"[149] in keeping with 19th century scientific paradigms in which "physical traits [were] positively connected to racial difference and

[145] Reel 4, Thomas Lacey séance collection.
[146] Robinson, *Hungry Listening,* 50.
[147] Robinson, *Hungry Listening,* 38.
[148] Robinson, *Hungry Listening,* 50.
[149] Troy, *The Spectre of the Indian*, xix

hierarchy."[150] In the darkness of the séance room, listening to voices was considered a reliable method of authenticating racial identity.[151] The séance itself, therefore, might be understood as a mechanism that constructs race through the continued marking of (non)bodies.

Although Troy notes that poetic oration was in some cases was understood as evidence of characteristic "Indian eloquence and "noble" speech," patterns of crude or "broken English" were equally interpreted as an assurance of Indian-ness, reflecting the role that voice and speech play in the conflict between "noble and savage imagery."[152][153] Indeed, it is the latter that is most palpably at play in records from both Lacey and Cartheuser's séances. Recordings from Lacey's circle suggest recurring vocal characteristics attributable to Indigenous spirits, including a tendency towards excessive loudness and short, blunt sentences full of grammatical errors (as evidenced in spirit exclamations such as "He come now. Big voice!," "Me Elk Horn!," and "She very mischief!").[154][155] Pincock also describes an encounter with her spirit guide, Bright Moon, who "came through in his jerky, wholesome manner,"[156] with assurances such as "Me help you! Me pleased to be here," and "Me know how to help you draw earth vibrations."[157] Such vocal qualities and speech patterns were immediately recognizable to sitters and acted as an aural key for ascribing Indian-ness to spirit presences.

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[150] Troy, *The Spectre of the Indian*, 32.
[151] Indeed, Eidsheim draws connection between audile techniques, which perceived voice as an index of interior states of the body, and racialized science of craniometry. See Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 17-18
[152] Troy, *The Spectre of the Indian*, 34-35.
[153] For a more in-depth discussion of the history of "Indian talk" in literature and popular culture, see Stedman, *Shadows of the Indian*, 58-73.
[154] Reel 19, Thomas Lacey séance collection.
[155] See also Interchapter B.
[156] Pincock, *Trails of Truth*, 102.
[157] Pincock, *Trails of Truth*, 102.

Once again, the listening techniques in the séance denote a paradoxical conviction in the status of voice as an index of bodily difference, even in a scenario in which voices ostensibly have no body. Indeed, the continued presence of racialized speech patterns and accents confounds several Spiritualist beliefs about the afterlife. Firstly, it was understood that since spirits did not maintain their physical bodies after death, they relied upon reconstructed ectoplasmic vocal apparatuses in order to speak (as will be discussed Chapter 4). Secondly, the acquisition of additional languages not spoken during their lifetimes was believed to be a part of a spirits' ongoing education after death, such that they might communicate with diverse groups around the world; yet the lingering presence of racially-coded accents seems at odds with this imagined enlightenment. [158] Rather the lingering presence of accent, as an aural marking of otherness, might be understood, not only as reification of body-ness via the voice, but as "a projection of racial difference into the ethereal realm."[159]

By highlighting the strangeness of this proposition—accent as a trace of a body that doesn't exist—I want to suggest that such a construction is only possible within, and is a product of, the particular listening orientation at work in séances, with its investments in modern audile technique and settler colonial listening positionalities. Indeed, in the absence of a spirit bodies, the séance demands that one consider voice, not as a bodily production, but rather in terms of the body-ness ascribed to it in its perception. It is crucial to think about accent, and indeed other racialized vocal markers, not as coherent and identifiable entities but as auditory events in which the listener's sensing and interpreting are profoundly implicated.[160] The examples enumerated

[158] Troy, *The Spectre of the Indian,* 35.
[159] McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 67.
[160] See Pooja Rangan, Akshya Saxena, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, and Pavitra Sundar, "Introduction: Thinking With An Accent," in *Thinking with an Accent: Toward a New Object, Method, and Practice*, eds Pooja Rangan, Akshya Saxena, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, and Pavitra Sundar (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023): 1-22.

above affirm that "the ear does not simply receive sound; it is a "coloring ear" that shades and racially encodes the voice."[161] As Eidsheim suggests, the acousmatic question ultimately discloses more about the listener posing it than about the voice being listened to;[162] "the voice does not arise solely from the vocalizer; it is created just as much within the process of listening."[163] Listening techniques in the séance, therefore, sustain the Spiritualist desire to *both* prove that spirit voices are truly disembodied *and* to categorize such voices according to bodily difference. The tactical ambivalence in the ways that bodies are heard, named, and inscribed enacts and activates this possibility.

In this chapter, I have interrogated the various mechanisms and procedures in the séance by which the body was constructed through its constraint, erasure, and denial—mechanisms that might also be understood as technologies of race and gender. While untouched sound comprises a crucial means to affirm the veracity of spirit voices, the dream of disembodiment is predicated upon, and indeed produces, particular modes of body-ness. In the following chapter, I return more explicitly to Alexa to examine how and what incredible voices are made to mean—what is a voice, if not an index of a speaking body? What are the particular conditions that must be specified when posing the already-fraught acousmatic question "who is this?" when it comes to AI voices?

[161] Rangan et al., "Introduction: Thinking With An Accent," 3.
[162] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 24.
[163] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound,* 11.

**INTERCHAPTER C) – oh. i've never. we have. ohh.**

00:01:00 Speaker 1

Oh. [1]

00:04:49 Speaker 1

Oh.

Nearly the entirety of this recording is taken up by Otto Smith playing the electric organ: long sustained chords, and dramatic, swelling melodies. There is no speech in the recording. The fact that ASR renders all the intricacies of instrumental music as a phonetic "oh," and labels the organ itself as Speaker 1, indicates the algorithm's imperative to perceive and process all sounds as English-language speech—even those of non-human and non-linguistic origins. The parameters of the machine listening application are such that voice is necessarily the sense-making frame through which all inputs are made legible, recognizing voices where there are none.

*organ stops, 12 seconds of silence*

*soft, staccato scraping sounds on the tape, a bit like short shallow breaths; perhaps the result of damage, degradation, or manipulation but with access only to digital files, rather than the original reels, this cannot be explored further*

00:05:03 Speaker 1

I've never. We have.

*high pitched chattering sounds, unlike the voices that come through during the other séances; like a chorus of children giggling and singing nonsense lyrics*

*cuts off abruptly*

[1] Reel 32, 9 March 1963, SCA258-GA270-62b, Thomas Lacey séance collection, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.

A handwritten note on the box of the original audio reel describes the presence of "celestial voices" alongside the music. An archivist tells me this is believed to be an example of electronic voice phenomena (EVP), a prominent practice in the mid-20th century that entailed using electronic devices, including radios, microphones, and tape recorders, to sonify subtle vibrations otherwise inaudible to human ears. Spirit voices, imperceptible in the moment of recording, were rendered audible during playback.[2] This recording is an outlier within the Lacey collection, not only in content but in function: the recording is not merely transcriptive, but revelatory. [3]

The process of discovering EVPs often requires adjusting playback speed or playing tape backwards, such that supernatural sounds might become perceptible. In so doing, EVP cultivates an interrogative mode of listening that, like ASR, is primed to hear voices; as Anthony Enns describes, "the translation of noise into signal required not only a device capable of adjusting and reshaping existing sounds, but also a listener searching for meaning in even the most innocuous and mundane sounds."[4] Both EVP and ASR, therefore, advance forms of auditory "recognition" that is perhaps more accurately understood as mediated fabrication—generating hallucinations through the pursuit of meaning.

[2] For more on the history of EVP, see Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 85-91.

[3] Simone Dotto, "The Mediumship of the Digital: Sound Recording, Supernatural Inquiry, and the Digital Afterlife of Phonography," in *Believing in Bits: Digital Media and the Supernatural*, eds. Simone Natale and D.W. Pasulka (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 61.

[4] Anthony Enns, "Voices of the Dead: Transmission/Translation/Transgression," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 46, no. 1 (2005): 21.

00:08:08 Speaker 1

Ohh.

00:15:39 Speaker 1

Oh.

00:15:40 Speaker 1

oh

00:15:46 Speaker 1

oh

00:20:43

Oh.

*music starts and stops, cuts in and out*

*intermittent silences, scraping, hissing…*

**4. Ectoplasmic vocality**

The conviction that voice is personal, that it bears some audible trace of a particular person and that its timbral qualities reveal or substantiate their identity, is palpably at work in séances. Jenny Pincock's circle was frequented by the spirits of her husband Newton and daughter Jane, who spoke and sang through the medium William Cartheuser's trumpets. During such gatherings held at her home, Pincock would often play the piano such that Newton might accompany her in song; as she reports in *Trails of Truth:* "his voice was strong and characteristic … it stirred the depths of our souls. A serenity filled the place which, a few minutes before, held relentless silences of yearning and hunger."[1] For Pincock, the perception that "my sweetheart was beside me—singing"[2] provides the respite from grief that drew her, and indeed many practitioners of Spiritualism, to séances in the first place. The recognisability and uniqueness of the voices of the dead is thus situated as an affective cornerstone of Spiritualist practice, as well as evidentiary criteria for paranormal investigation. Beyond any message delivered via the voice, Newton's independent singing is rendered meaningful according to Pincock's ability to identify the extra-linguistic qualities, such as timbre and tone, that make it singular.

While Pincock's account demonstrates her absolute conviction that the direct voice coming through the trumpet belonged to her beloved and signaled his continued presence by her side, the attribution of these sounds to a self-contained spirit entity is necessarily complicated. In one of Pincock's early sittings with Cartheuser, held in the Spiritualist community of Lily Dale, New York in September 1928, shortly after Newton's death, Pincock seemingly struggled to recognize his voice. Telling her husband that while she was moved by the ability to converse

[1] Pincock, *Trails of Truth*, 92-93.
[2] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 93.

with him facilitated by the séance, she "particularly long[ed]" for his "strong voice,"[3] to which Newton replied: "Do you not realize that I have not my own physical vocal organs any more? When the voice speaks over the phone or radio it is not perfect."[4] Newton's explanation implies that, in the absence of a speaking body, unseen technical interventions are required to facilitate spirit voicing. Indeed, the explanation that Pincock develops in her later writing foregrounds an analogy between mediumship and modern media technologies, referring to Cartheuser as "a super radio [that …] may tune us in to vibrations more delicate than any machine yet discovered by the mortal mind."[5] The peculiar quality, or poor fidelity, of spirit voices is thereby explained as a technical limitation or glitch in the process of intermundane transmission, the result of an imperfect, but necessary, mediating apparatus.[6]

As Pincock's research attempts to elaborate the details of this apparatus, the relationship between the speaking spirit and the audible voice becomes all the more convoluted as it becomes, both literally and figuratively, entangled with ectoplasm: the supernatural material that seemingly extrudes from the body of the medium and can be molded by spirits to particular effects. In addition to the mysterious properties of ectoplasm itself, which Pincock christens "ectoplasm, the invisible, ectoplasm, the intangible,"[7] the mechanics by which paranormal energies are transduced into recognizable voices are difficult to cohesively figure. In Pincock's estimation, vibrations from the spirit world are "stepped down, or transformed, to us through ether by the agency of [an] ectoplasmic substance."[8] While the radio remains the most consistent analogy in her writing for describing ectoplasm's transductive potential, she also references

[3] Séance notes, 15 September 1928, SCA94-GA64-4-104, Maines Pincock Family fonds, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.
[4] Séance notes, 15 September 1928.
[5] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 17.
[6] Galvan, "The Victoria Post-human," 84.
[7] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 16.
[8] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 16.

batteries,[9] stringed instruments,[10] and vocal cords[11] in order to specify the form and function of ectoplasm in making spirit voices audible to the ears of the living. This proliferation of metaphors, I argue, speaks to an imperfect alignment between a transmission model of communication, upon which so much Spiritualist practice (and indeed analyses of it), are predicated,[12] and the ectoplasmic vocality that Pincock and other psychical researchers construct. Unlike a radio broadcast, there is no point of origin, no speaking body, no utterance transduced across (astral) distance. Spirit voices are not reliable indexes; rather they are generated in and by the technology of the séance. The séance, therefore, comprises an arena in which a conviction in the singularity of the voice as the property of a particular spirit is co-present with an understanding of the ungraspable complexity of the supernormal processes and collaborations that comprise it.

In this chapter, I examine the ways that voices are meant and made to mean in post-indexical media contexts—in both séances and AI interfaces—even as unconvincing likenesses, and even without disavowing the mechanisms that produce them. The lack of distinctive grain did not dilute the intimacy of Pincock's sonic encounters with spirit; the resemblance, however meager or imperfect, to Newton's earthly voice was enough for Pincock to endow it with profound significance. Furthermore, the emotional potency of spirit voice persisted despite Pincock's belief that the voices heard in the séance room were not the utterance of a singular ghostly subject, but rather generated through supernatural vibratory mechanisms. I argue that voices generated via machine learning are subject to similar investments and suspensions of

[9] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 16.
[10] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 48.
[11] Séance notes, 19 March 1929.
[12] See Sconce, *Haunted Media*.

(dis)belief.[13] Returning to Alexa's forecasted voice-cloning abilities that serve as the introductory anecdote for this dissertation, such an affordance is similarly premised upon the assumption that users will regard it as a profoundly personal revivification of a lost loved one while understanding that it is nothing of the sort. Indeed, in low-resource voice-cloning, which promises to extract and encode the unique features of particular voice from only one minute of vocal training data, the process of training and fine-tuning the model also requires parallel inputs, data extracted from elsewhere, from other speakers, in order generate a high-quality output.[14] The purported miracle of low-resource text-to-speech (TTS) is precisely how little recorded speech it requires, how a sophisticated speaker embedding can be developed from such a miniscule indexical trace.[15]

I offer up ectoplasmic vocality as a mobile concept that brings the more-than personal voices constructed in the séance and generated via machine learning into resonance with one another. While the term ectoplasm circulates in popular culture as a "shorthand for the intangible, transient, invisible, uncapturable,"[16] more compelling are the strange figurations and contradictory metaphors that emerge in the attempt to capture it, to render it static, tangible, and visible. I aspire to explicate the incongruous yet co-present vocal "ways of being"[17] that emerge

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[13] Shane Denson articulates this distinction between suspension of disbelief and suspensions of belief with regard to DeepFake images produced via generative AI. See Shane Denson, *Post-Cinematic Bodies* (Lüneberg: meson press, 2023), 108-111.

[14] Gabrys et al., "Voice Filter," 7902–6.

[15] Between the re:MARS presentation in 2022 and the time of writing, advancements in low-resource TTS have sought to generate high-quality synthesized speech based on every smaller audio samples from a target speaker, with Microsoft's VALL-E text-to-speech model requires only three seconds of recorded speech to produce a voice clone. See "VALL-E Family: Neural codec language models for speech synthesis," Microsoft, accessed July 11, 2025, https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/project/vall-e-x/.

[16] Murray Leeder, ""Mere Symbolic Ectoplasm:" The Ectoplasmic Screen," in *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs*, ed. Serena Keshavjee (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2023), 204.

[17] Cathy Berberian, "The New Vocality in Contemporary Music," trans. Francesca Placanica, in *Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality*, eds. Pamela Karantonis, Francesca Placanica, Anne Sivuoja-Kauppala and Pieter Verstraete (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 47.

in tandem with theories of ectoplasm: as profoundly personal and de-personalized, as singular and collective. Perhaps most strikingly, the supernormal apparatus of the séance constructs the voices of the living as a resource that can be accumulated, stored, and re-directed by unseen agents in order to make audible the voices of the dead—a figuration that, I argue, prefigures the ways that AI-generated voices, including Alexa, rely upon a vast corpus of vocal data and indeed gather recordings of user interactions to further their own natural language processing skills.

Before delving into intricacies of ectoplasm as it is depicted and described in archival séance records (4.1), I wish to address the specificity of the term vocality as I use it here. Katherine Meizel notes that while in common parlance, vocality is used to denote the presence or use of voice, generally corresponding with an emitting human body, the term has developed within academic literature as a call for more expansive thinking about voice.[18] In her book *Multivocality: Singing on the Borders of Identity*, Meizel crafts a "brief history of vocality"[19] that provides the theoretical scaffolding for her own exploration of voicing as an intersubjective process and means to navigate and narrate intersectional identities. This summary catalogs the varied usage of this term within 20th century music and sound studies, arriving at a definition of vocality as "both an embodied act and a constructive process," entangled with discourses and techniques of difference and power.[20]

The texts that Meizel weaves together might be broadly understood to enact a double expansion beyond what is typically contained by voice: vocality serves to encompass a greater range of audible oral sounds, as well as the social arena in which a voice is received and

[18] Katherine Meizel, *Multivocality: Singing on the Borders of Identity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 7.
[19] Meizel, *Multivocality*, 7-11.
[20] Meizel, *Multivocality*,11.

interpreted. Avant-garde performer Cathy Berberian's call for a "new vocality," for instance, insists that singers embrace "diverse vocal emissions" typically excluded from musical experience, including sighs, sobs, screams, and laughter, such that they might develop new "ways of being" for voice.[21] Leslie Dunn and Nancy Jones also suggest that vocality signals "a broader spectrum of utterance" that exceeds an easy conflation of voice with language. Indeed, Roland Barthes' concept of the grain of the voice—"the body in the voice as it sings"[22] —is central to their conceptualization of vocality as embodied aural production enmeshed within the cultural milieu of its utterance.

While Barthes describes the grain of the voice in visceral terms, an audible quality that emerges "from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages,"[23] it is crucially more than a lingering material essence. Rather, the grain of the voice sonifies "the very precise space […] of *the encounter between a language and a voice*;"[24] it sounds a threshold between individual bodies and collective systems, such as language, musical conventions, and culturally-specific vocal practices. For Dunn and Jones, vocality signals an attention to both the physicality and sociality of the grain. They stress the "vital interrelationship" between voicing and audition, with vocality encompassing the "intersubjective acoustic space" in which voices are heard and assigned meaning.[25] Steven Feld, Aaron A. Fox, Thomas Porcello, and David Samuels, similarly turn to Barthes in their conceptualization of vocality, arguing that "the

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[21] Berberian, "The New Vocality in Contemporary Music," 47.
[22] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, NY: Hill & Wang, 1977), 188.
[23] Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 181.
[24] Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 181.
[25] Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, "Introduction," in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, eds. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

physical grain of the voice has a fundamentally social life."[26] Moreover, they note the ways that voice, beyond its sonorous qualities, is mobilized "as a metaphor for difference, a key representational trope for identity, power, conflict, social position, and agency."[27] The practices, conditions, and contexts of audition by which voices are granted such significance and status also fall under the rubric of vocality.

While my own consideration of vocality is informed by the academic tradition that Meizel outlines, and shares a "post-structuralist commitment to linking the materiality of sound to the sociality of vocal practice,"[28] I also believe that vocality might be extended along a different axis. In order to do so, I wish to linger with an earlier definition of vocality, which Meizel grants a passing reference as the starting point for her brief history, yet goes under-emphasized within it. According to Meizel, the term vocality first appears in early 20th century research in psychoacoustics, describing the perception of vowel-like "human" sounds perceived within "pure" tones.[29] Following psycholinguist Wolfgang Köhler's coining of the term *vokalcharakter* to describe the property of audible vowel-ness attributable to different sonic frequencies,[30] several American researchers set out to evaluate and elaborate his findings. J.D. Modell and G.J. Rich conducted an experiment in which a small group of observers listened to a variety of pitches produced via tone variators, piston whistles, and tuning forks, and were "told to regard the tone as speaking or singing a vowel to them."[31] Despite the fact that participants

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[26] Steven Feld, Aaron A. Fox, Thomas Porcello, and David Samuels, "Vocal Anthropology: From the Music of Language to the Language of Song," in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Malden, MA.: Blackwell, 2009), 341.
[27] Feld et al., "Vocal Anthropology," 341.
[28] Feld et al., "Vocal Anthropology," 340.
[29] Meizel, *Multivocality*, 7.
[30] Köhler, Wolfgang Köhler, "Akustische Untersuchungen II," *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* 58 (1910), 59-140.; for a summary of Köhler's research in English, see A.P. Weiss, "The Vowel Character of Fork Tones," *The American Journal of Psychology* 31, no. 2 (1920): 166–193.
[31] J. D. Modell and G. J. Rich, "A Preliminary Study of Vowel Qualities," *The American Journal of Psychology* 26, no. 3 (1915): 453.

could not reliably align the same vowel sounds with stable pitch ranges, Modell and Rich conclude that "the fact of vocality" remains, as that which can "be heard into or heard out of"[32] tones produced by various mechanical apparatuses. A.P. Weiss devised a number of similar experiments in which participants were again asked to assign vowels to tuning fork tones, defining vocality as the "form of discrimination"[33] by which sounds could be located on a continuum between mellowness and shrillness, much like pitch, volume, duration, intensity, and tone-colour.[34]

Vocality in this context shares an orientation towards perception and discernment with the definition that Meizel crafts; it emerges as it is listened for, named, and classified according to the phonetic systems of the English language. Yet within the psychoacoustics lab, it necessarily describes something other than the "literal, audible voice"[35] that Dunn and Jones, and indeed other scholars cited above, foreground. This is vocality without the "embodied act" of vocalizing; rather, it describes the attribution of vocal qualities to auditory phenomena that are not otherwise understood as voices. I understand the act of ascribing vocality in this context as a particular modern instrumentalization of what Steven Connor describes as the "default question" of human hearing: "is there a voice to be heard in this sound?"[36] Modell, Rich, and Weiss' experiments activate and operationalize a tendency to "move from the nonvocal to the vocal"[37] that Connor associates with a variety of auditory hallucinations and mishearings. I suggest that the hearing into/out of that constructs vocality in early 20th century psychoacoustics is emblematic of what Connor calls an "apprehension of the world as 'meaning-to-mean'" in which

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[32] Modell and Rich, "A Preliminary Study of Vowel Qualities," 456.
[33] Weiss, "The Vowel Character of Fork Tones," 191.
[34] Weiss, "The Vowel Character of Fork Tones," 176.
[35] Dunn and Jones, "Introduction," 1.
[36] Steven Connor, "Panophonia" (Lecture, Centre Pompidou, Paris, February 22, 2012).
[37] Steven Connor, "Earslips: Of Mishearings and Mondegreens," (presentation, Listening In, Feeding Back conference, Columbia University, New York, NY, February 14, 2009).

sounds are regarded as "simmering with possible significance, and insurgent vocality."[38] Indeed, I argue that this approach to sonic phenomena as meaning to mean is shared with the séance, which likewise asks participants to regard and assess sounds as voices in the absence of speaking bodies.

The emergence of vocality from interrogative listening might also be understood in keeping with Eidsheims' formulation of the acousmatic question discussed in the previous chapter, which, by asking "who is this?", approaches voice from the listener's perspective and suggests that voice becomes such through the process of audition and naming.[39] However, attending to vocality as defined within psychoacoustic experiments crucially undermines the *who* of the acousmatic question; it suspends the search for a singular knowable human referent, since it is premised on the acknowledgement that there is no such source to be found. Rather than foregrounding the grain—"the body in the voice"—in this context, vocality attends to the vocal qualities discerned in mechanically produced sound; vocality intervenes in the seemingly indelible coupling of voice with the human body by naming the voice-ness of nonhuman sound.

I reintroduce this definition of vocality not as a corrective to the social approaches to embodied oral speech and singing outlined in Meizel's literature review, but as a co-present potential within it. Indeed, embracing vocality as a critical term for understanding the extra-linguistic material-discursivity of both embodied utterance *and* disembodied sonic phenomena is crucial to my study of both spirit voice and those produced via generative AI. Moreover, in both situations, listeners figure and endow more-than human sounds with *qualities* of voice, without believing that it *is* a "literal" voice, in the sense of embodied oral speech. What does it mean,

[38] Connor, "Earslips."
[39] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound,* 11-13.

therefore, to count these sounds as voices, and why does it matter?[40] Rather than sites oriented around voices, I wish to attend to séances and AI voice interfaces as instantiations of very specific vocalities, characterized by particular representational effects, truth procedures, and structures of (dis)belief. Such vocalities, I argue, resonate with Weiss' observation that the fork tones in his psychoacoustic experiments "do *not* sound like vowels used in language but yet may be said to resemble them so closely that consistent judgments are soon made upon this basis."[41] I am interested in the distinction that Weiss makes here; how can a sound "*not* sound like" yet still closely resemble a voice? Such vocalities therefore operate within the field of tenuous similes, of not-like but somehow near enough.

It is this dimension of vocality that I wish to amplify in its pairing with ectoplasm, since séances are replete with not-like resemblances. Ectoplasmic structures that researchers admit look like nothing a human vocal apparatus are nonetheless understood to function as one; voices that don't sound like the people they claim to be are nonetheless understood to signal their presence. In the following section, I return to séance archives to access the particularities of ectoplasmic appearances and the vocalities that they engender. I seek to attend not only to what Spiritualists and psychical researchers narrate and register in photographs, but the process of creating such recordings, the rhetorical challenges to describing the indescribable, and the investment in technical solutions for giving form to that which exceeds representation.

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[40] Similar questions also emerge within recent debates regarding the status of AI-generated images and whether they can be defined as photographs. Amanda Wasielewski's term "photographicness," a visual quality that such images convey despite having been created without a camera, resonates to some extent with the ways that I use vocality here. However, I also seek to echo Brooke Belisle's critique of Wasielewski, which advocates for greater attention to the ongoing contestation and redefinition of photographicness, rather than its status a universal and static category: "if these images count as photographs, what would that mean and how would it matter?" See Brooke Belisle, "*Critical Response I:* Photography and AI: Why It Matters, Though" *Critical Inquiry* 51, no. 2 (January 1, 2025): 397–404; Amanda Wasielewski, "Unnatural Images: On AI-Generated Photographs." *Critical Inquiry* 51, no. 1 (September 1, 2024): 1–29.

[41] Weiss, The Vowel Character of Fork Tones," 189.

### 4.1 Utilitarian Teleplasms

Ectoplasmic materialization was a focal point in the experiments conducted by Dr. T.G. Hamilton at his home in Winnipeg, and indeed was a prominent area of study among psychical researchers in both Europe and North America in the early 20th century.[42] Dr. Charles Richet, a Nobel prize winning physiologist and psychical researcher, claimed to have coined the term "ectoplasm" in a 1923 treatise cited frequently in Hamilton's own writings. [43] Richet describes ectoplasm as "a kind of gelatinous protoplasm, formless at first, that exudes from the body of the medium, and takes form later."[44] Although invisible to the unaided human eye, ectoplasm, according to Richet, is substantial to the point that it can be discerned through tactile sensation or leave an imprint on malleable surfaces.[45] In keeping with the scientific commitments of psychical research, séances often included attempts to measure and record such materializations, using scales to weigh ectoplasmic masses and a chemist's thermometer to take its temperature. [46] Experiments with red light and photography also allowed researchers to catch a glimpse of this mysterious substance that was seemingly soluble in natural light.[47]

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[42] For a closer reading of the Hamilton circle in dialogue with prominent European psychical researchers including Albert von Schrenk Notzing, Juliette Bisson and Charles Richet, and famous 20th century mediums including Eva C and Eusapia Palladino, see Serena Keshavjee, "Embodying the Dead," in *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs*, edited by Serena Keshavjee, (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2023), 223-275.
[43] Keshavjee, ""Experiments and Experiences in Psychical Research."" 59.
[44] Richet, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, 515.
[45] Richet, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, 430.
[46] Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, "The Margery Teleplasms: Observations and Generalizations," *Proceedings for the American Society for Psychical Research* 20-21 (1933): 494.
[47] Hamilton, "The Margery Teleplasms," 499.

Figure 15: Photo of the medium Mary M. with ectoplasm covering her face taken at a séance held by T.G. Hamilton's circle on July 10, 1929. Courtesy of University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections.

Descriptions of ectoplasm from séance records provide varied, and often contradictory, accounts of its physical properties. Indeed, a variety of similes proliferate in Bird's account of ectoplasmic materializations from Margery's mediumship: "a large, soft, rubbery, cold, uniform mass, more or less like the after-birth of a baby," "covered with a thick humpy skin like that of a toad," and "like the cross-cut surface of an animal tissue, like liver or lung."[48] In contrast, yet simultaneously, to these visceral tactile encounters with ectoplasm, Hamilton describes the way that ectoplasm rapidly appears and disappears under the conditions of red light: "comparable to the cloud of white water vapour seen coming out of a factory exhaust pipe. At first a large, white,

[48] Hamilton, "The Margery Teleplasms," 500.

opaque, substantial-looking cloud or mass—then all at once there is nothing."[49] Indeed, most photographic documentation seems to support this account of ectoplasm as ethereal and ephemeral, characterized by recurring visual tropes such as, to quote Richet, "white veils and milky patches" with more cohesive forms and figures forming "little by little in the midst of gelatinous paste that resembles moist and sticky muslin."[50] As captured in numerous photos taken by Hamilton's circle [Figure 15], ectoplasm appears as a gauzy, amorphous mass often spread across the face of the medium Mary M. Fragile to the point that only the most advanced photographic equipment could register it,[51] ectoplasm is depicted as both solid and airy; always on the verge, or suspended in the act, of supernatural sublimation.

Ectoplasm is described in similarly contradictory terms when it comes to its relationship to the body. Richet's definition relies on biological terminology (i.e. "protoplasm" or "embryo-genesis"[52] etc.), and indeed advances a theory that ectoplasm comprises organic matter.[53] Moreover, psychical researchers not only describe ectoplasm in fleshy terms, often extruding from the medium's orifices and remaining tethered to her body, but construct it as a bio-specimen. Once again, the apparatus of scientific inquiry frames ectoplasm as a bodily extension of the markedly bodily body of the female medium, as Bird notes that ectoplasm is best explained as "the medium herself, partially externalized."[54] However, this bodily-ness is immediately and necessarily qualified or partial: ectoplasm possesses "a quasi-identity between the medium and the ectoplasm,"[55] is "semi-material,"[56] and "a half-living emanation from the

[49] Hamilton, "The Margery Teleplasms," 499.
[50] Richet, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, 515.
[51] Schoonover, "Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography," 37-38.
[52] Richet, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, 515.
[53] See Keshavjee, "Embodying the Dead," 234-35.
[54] Hamilton, "The Margery Teleplasms," 502.
[55] Richet, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, 458.
[56] Bird, *Margery,* 171.

body."[57] While séance photographs seemingly catch ectoplasm in the act of pouring out from or retracting into the recesses of the medium's body, whether the medium is the source of ectoplasm was a topic of considerable debate. Anchored by, yet irreducible to, the body and the biological, the quandaries of ectoplasm are symptomatic of an empiricist urge to make intangible forces discernable and measureable. The construction of this ambivalent matter emerges in attempts to accommodate what the epistemic paradigm that guides psychical research cannot otherwise accommodate.

While Richet's coinage "ectoplasm" remains the widely adopted term to describe such paranormal phenomena, Hamilton expresses a preference for the term "teleplasm," with "tele" connoting "at a distance" and "plasm" to mold or to shape.[58] For Hamilton, this description more accurately accounts for the ability of a "directing agency" to determine the form that the substance might take and mold it for particular uses. [59] In the context of his own séances, and those convened by Margery's circle, this directing agency was the spirit control Walter, whose efforts aligned with the investigator's desire to generate and record tangible evidence of spirit phenomena.[60] Walter himself referred to the substance as the "energy"[61] required to support a successful séance; or in the context of Margery's circle, he used the analogy of "yarn," which he stretched in various ways such that it "provided the means for delivering various physical effects and telekinetic phenomena."[62]

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[57] Richet, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, 432.
[58] Margaret Hamilton Bach, "Notes 1921-85," MSS 14, Box 17, Folder 10, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.
[59] Hamilton Bach, "Notes 1921-85."
[60] Both Hamilton and Margery's circles expressed a preference for the term "teleplasm" and seemingly guided by the same spirit control, Walter.
[61] Hamilton, "The Margery Teleplasms," 493.
[62] Bird, "*Margery," The Medium*, 98.

The materialization of teleplasm was a point of significant interest for researchers in and of itself, as Hamilton's extensive attempts to photograph the insubstantial substance attest. Yet teleplasm was also functional, as the description of Walter's "yarn" above implies; it was key among the "tools employed in the physical work of the séances."[63] Many of the physical phenomena described in previous chapters were believed to transpire through the production and manipulation of teleplasm by spirit agents. Indeed, replacing the prefix ecto- with tele- also makes plain the connection between this paranormal substance and telekinetic phenomena; tables and trumpets didn't levitate simply at the will of spirits, mediums, or sitters but via teleplasm as the intervening vehicle that made objects move around the séance room. Hamilton therefore coined the term "utilitarian teleplasms"[64] to describe materializations that served to facilitate other forms of spirit communication and psychic phenomena. For example, Hamilton's séance room was equipped with a bell-box: an electric bell encased within a locked wooden box and mounted atop the séance cabinet, out of arms reach of the medium and sitters.[65] The ringing of the untouched bell was understood to transpire via ectoplasmic cords, which Walter extended from the body of the medium seated in the cabinet.[66] Teleplasm is therefore not merely a residue of spirit phenomena, but a necessary material for its production.

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[63] Bird, "*Margery," The Medium*, 171-172.
[64] Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, "The Divisions of the Mary M Teleplasms," MSS 14, Box 15, Folder 10, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.
[65] For a more detailed description of bell-boxes, initially devised for use in Margery's séances, see Robertson, *Science of the Séance*, 105-113.
[66] "Exceedingly Brilliant Bell-Box Phenomena" (séance notes), 30 December 1928, MSS 14, Box 5, Folder 1, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB; "An Evening of Fun With the Bell-Box" (séance notes), 5 September, 1928, MSS 14, Box 15, Folder 12, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB; "The Mediumship of Mary Marshall" (séance notes), 5 August 1928, MSS 14, Box 5, Folder 1, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.

While teleplasm was indeed multi-purpose, of particular interest here is its role in producing direct voice. In Margery's séances, extensive tests seemingly proved that such spirit voices manifested independently of the body of the medium. This led the investigators to infer that "to form words there must be developed a teleplasmic structure in some way similar to the living human organ used therefor."[67] Direct voices do not emerge from thin air but are produced through an instrument constructed of teleplasm that in some way mimicked the mechanics of a human vocal apparatus. Walter's "speaking machine" was seen and photographed on numerous occasions by Margery's circle, and was described as "a mass which may be either gray or white, about 4 x 2 x 2 inches, resembling the size and shape of a potato," possessing a small shrivelled face and two cords which connect to Margery's right ear and nostril and that rested on her shoulder, chest, or face. [68] While investigators conceded that that the mass bore little resemblance to any human voice-producing structures, they maintained that it might "flower out" in the darkness into a more faithful anatomical replica. [69]

[67] Hamilton, "The Margery Teleplasms," 498.
[68] Hamilton, "The Margery Teleplasms," 498.
[69] Hamilton, "The Margery Teleplasms," 498.

Figure 16-17: Photo of Walter's ectoplasmic "voice box" extruding from Mary M.'s ear taken at a séance held by T.G. Hamilton's circle on July 10, 1929. Courtesy of University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections.

Hamilton cites the presence of direct voice in Margery's circle, and the conclusion that such voices have a teleplasmic structure as their basis, as the impetus for his own experiments seeking to prove a similar hypothesis.[70] Indeed, as in Margery's séances, the Hamilton circle similarly documented the reoccurring presence of a direct voice attributed to Walter that was audibly distinct from that of the medium Mary M.[71] Séance notes describe Walter's voice as "man-like in character, husky but vigorous,"[72] and "throaty."[73] Walter's voice was also identified by a tell-tale difficulty in pronouncing a sibilant "S."[74] The Hamilton circle succeeded in capturing a photograph of Walter's "talking machine" or "voice box' at a séance on July 10,

[70] Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, "Article V: Research Shows Many Functions Teleplasm," n.d., MSS 14, Box 15, Folder 6, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.
[71] For clarity and consistency, I will use the name Mary M. although séance notes also refer to her by her full name, Mary Marshall, as well as the pseudonym Dawn.
[72] Séance notes, 10 July 1929, MSS 14, Box 15, Folder 16, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.
[73] Hamilton, "Article V: Research Shows Many Functions for Teleplasm."
[74] Séance notes, 10 July 1929.

1929 [Figure 16-17], which comprised a "peculiar" mass of teleplasm extruding below Mary M's left ear "capable of audible, intelligent conversation."[75] As was common practice in Hamilton's séances, Walter provided the sitters with vocal cues in order to support their endeavours to record ectoplasm with the aid of a camera. At this particular sitting, Walter conversed with the sitters via direct voice, eventually asking "how would you like to take the picture now?" and directing Hamilton to release the flash by calling out "fire!".[76] Following the photograph being taken, "a sucking noise was heard … as if the whole formation had suddenly been withdrawn into [Mary M.'s] throat."[77] The photographs later revealed what notes describe as a "trumpet-like formation" with a "hairy appearance."[78]

Figure 18: Photo of Walter's ectoplasmic "voice box" on top of Mary M.'s head at a séance held in the Hamilton family home on April 6, 1939. Courtesy of University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections.

[75] Séance notes, 10 July 1929.
[76] Séance notes, 10 July 1929.
[77] Séance notes, 10 July 1929.
[78] Séance notes, 10 July 1929.

A "voice box" was once again captured at a later in séance on April 6, 1939, this time perched on top of Mary M.'s head [Figure 18] and described in séance notes as "a genuinely supernormal mechanism, created and used by those living in the non-physical world, to make their voice(s) audible in our world."[79] As with the speaking machine that was photographed at Margery's séances in Boston, the masses that appeared in Winnipeg were thought to be attached to the medium via teleplasmic cords which could extend a considerable distance away from the body. [80] Hence, teleplasmic voice boxes accounted for the spatial dimensions of direct voice phenomena, acting as a quasi-material source for the voices which sitters audibly discerned to emanate from points in the room beyond the medium's body.

While teleplasm seemingly maintains a connection to the medium, and appears to emerge from, and return to, the interior recesses of her body, Hamilton's account crucially does *not* suggest that the medium is the origin of the teleplasm. In contrast to Bird's description of Margery's teleplasm as "herself, partially externalized,"[81] Hamilton understands teleplasm as a resource that is generated, stored, and put to use in the context of a séance:

> "the production of this mysterious substance … is the outcome of certain unknown supernormal processes of accumulation and storage going on until such time as sufficient is available for the anticipated experiment, when it is speedily materialized and utilized for the completion of the work in hand."[82]

Indeed, Hamilton's circle attempts to account for the complexity of these multiple and intersecting "supernormal processes" that exceed individual agency or ability. The dynamics at

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[79] "Enlargement of Voice Box" (séance notes), 6 April 1939, MSS 14, Box 17, Folder 6, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.
[80] Letter from Thomas Glendenning Hamilton to Mr. Harvey Agnew, 1931, MSS 14, Box 5, Folder 1, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections.
[81] Hamilton, "The Margery Teleplasms," 502.
[82] Letter from Thomas Glendenning Hamilton to Mr. Theodore Besterman, 11 April 1934, MSS 14, Box 5, Folder 1, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections.

work in Hamilton's séances de-centralize the role of the medium as the singular necessary mechanism upon which the séance relies to elaborate a more expansive ecology.

Although most of the teleplasmic phenomena that came to preoccupy the Hamilton's experiments were associated with Mary M.'s mediumship (and indeed, she features prominently in the photographic archive with white plasm covering her face, and pouring from her mouth, ears, and nose), she was not the first or only medium affiliated with Hamilton's séances. Elizabeth M.,[83] who has employed by the Hamiltons as a nanny, acted as a medium in séances held at the family home as early as 1920, and demonstrated considerable facility with table tipping, clairvoyance, trance speaking, and automatic writing.[84] Yet by early 1928, the Hamiltons concluded that she "seemed to have passed the peak of her mediumistic development."[85] Mary M. was subsequently invited to join the group, and her introduction corresponded with the unexpected appearance of the remarkable teleplasmic phenomena described above. Yet Mary M.'s presence was understood to build upon or intensify, rather than replace, the contributions of her predecessor. Séance notes outline a revised protocol in which the sitting opened with Elizabeth M. seated in the cabinet at the front of the room, quickly falling into a deep trance and producing automatic writing for several minutes. Upon returning to consciousness, she vacated the cabinet for Mary M. and took a seat in the circle. In most transcripts from this peak period in the Hamilton family's experiments, insights gleaned from Elizabeth M.'s trance speaking and writing are confined to a few brief remarks preceding a multi-page in-depth account of teleplasmic materializations and direct voice manifestations seemingly facilitated by Mary M.

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[83] Again, séance notes interchangeably refer to Elizabeth M. by this abbreviation or by her full name, Elizabeth Poole.

[84] Esyllt W. Jones further remarks upon Elizabeth M.'s background as a working class Scottish immigrant, identifying the classed and gendered language with which Lillian Hamilton describes her predisposition for mediumship: "uneducated, illiterate, but loved by all who knew her well, for her warm and kindliness and childlike heart." See Jones, "Ghostly Pandemics," 33-34.

[85] Letter from Lillian Hamilton to Mr. J.M. Bird.

Nonetheless, Elizabeth M.'s trance ritual provided a consistent, and seemingly necessary, prelude to what researchers considered to be more advanced registrations of psychic phenomena.

In a letter to Bird, Lillian Hamilton explains that while the circle initially attributed the development of "remarkable teleplasmic phenomena"[86] to Mary M.'s presence, they quickly determined that such a simple explanation was insufficient: "experiments soon showed that [Elizabeth M.] was equally essential to their successful production."[87] Indeed, Walter insisted that Elizabeth M. was "absolutely essential," explaining to the group that he gathered power from her and "puts it through [Mary M.]."[88] Mary M. was therefore a beneficial addition to the Hamilton's circle not so much as a source of teleplasm, but as a remarkably adept container for storing energies generated outside her body.[89] Furthermore, the teleplasm that amasses within Mary M. is understood as a collective yield or aggregate of the energetic contributions of the sitters. Séance notes report that Walter declared that while Mary M.'s "brain [was] filled to overflowing with ectoplasm," he did not "use her much more than the rest;" indeed he "used" all of the sitters in the room to produce spirit phenomena.[90] Walter instructed that Mary M. must be dressed in a single, loose fitting garment, to which Hamilton queried: "Is it difficult to get [the teleplasm] out?". Walter replied that the challenge was rather "to get it in—what I take from you all."[91] Teleplasm, therefore, is understood as mobile; not proper to any particular participant in the séance, but rather an energy that transits and accumulates among them. It gives form to

[86] Letter from Lillian Hamilton to Mr. J.M. Bird.
[87] Letter from Lillian Hamilton to Mr. J.M. Bird.
[88] "The Mediumship of Mary Marshall."
[89] In figuring Mary M. as a vessel, I argue that this comprises yet another instance of virtuosity denied to a female medium, as discussed at length in Chapter 3.
[90] Séance notes, 17 April 1929, MSS 14, Box 15, Folder 14, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.
[91] "Conversations and Instructions" (séance notes), 3 March 1929, MSS 14, Box 15, Folder 14, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.

relationality, making tangible the dynamic, and indeed more-than human, processes that comprise spirit phenomena.

Such descriptions further imply that, despite the continued framing of the séance around her mediumistic abilities, neither Mary M. or Elizabeth M. were isolated or exceptional in their contributions. As Lillian Hamilton describes, experiments determined that "the presence of several of the sitters was also required. We found, in other words, that these phenomena were due to a group mediumship."[92] T.G. Hamilton further underscored the profundity of this discovery, stating the Mary M. teleplasms are "undoubtedly the product of several mediums' organisms functioning simultaneously,"[93] with sitters becoming not only spectators but integral contributors to the operation of the séance. Lillian Hamilton framed such contributions in altruistic terms, arguing that the advancement of psychic science is contingent upon the willingness of séance participant to exceed the role of observers and hone their own mediumistic abilities in a collective setting; the "discovery of truth" is dependent upon such "self-sacrificing gifts."[94]

Accounts from Hamilton's circle describe the contributions of the sitters to the séance in technical terms, with Walter describing human participants as "little cogs fitting into one machine."[95] Pincock's circle similarly foregrounded the significance of the sitters to the functioning of the séance; yet rather than describing their role in mechanical terms, the structure of the séance proffered in Pincock's writing is more akin to a black boxed system, in which the sitters provide a collective input that yields a corresponding output. As Pincock explains:

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[92] Letter from Lillian Hamilton to Mr. J.M. Bird.
[93] Letter from Thomas Glendenning Hamilton to Mr. Theodore Besterman.
[94] "Teleplasmic Cord Behind Dawn's Left Ear" (séance notes), 30 March 1939, MSS 14, Box 17, Folder 6, Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba, Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg, MB.
[95] "Walter Foretells Two Things" (séance notes).

"meager or good results are the harvest of the mental attitude of the sitters. You receive what you give."[96] The collective participation of the sitters is therefore essential to the production of spirit phenomena through the technology of the séance; they are not only located within the apparatus, but comprise an essential resource upon which it draws.

Crucially, one of the primary ways that sitters contributed to the generation of teleplasm was through voicing. It was common practice for séances to begin with collective prayer and song, with the sitters speaking and singing together in unison in order to establish the propitious energetic conditions for spirit manifestations. Hamilton's séances were also routinely interspersed with hymnals and other popular songs as a means to fuel teleplasmic materializations;[97] the group demonstrated a particular fondness for "Jingle Bells,"[98] no doubt a droll reference to the function of teleplasm in making the bell-box ring. In Pincock's circle too, group singing was deployed as a means to generate the necessary energy to sustain the séance. On one occasion, when the "power" dwindled causing a trumpet to crash to the floor, Dr. Anderson called upon the sitters to perform "Silent Night" in order to restore it.[99] Indeed, Pincock's notes articulate the connection between the voices of the sitters and the voice of spirit most explicitly, explaining that "the audibility of the [spirit] voice is created by re-using the stored-up sound waves you create by your singing and conversation, very much like a storage battery."[100] The operational logics of the séance, therefore, situate voice as a resource that supports the creation of other voices; the sitters' singing generates the ectoplasmic material from which spirit speech is generated. While signaling the presence of a singular, distinctive, and

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[96] Pincock, *Trails of Truth*, 32.
[97] "Exceedingly Brilliant Bell-Box Phenomena."
[98] "The Mediumship of Mary Marshall."
[99] Pincock, *Trails of Truth*, 214.
[100] Séance notes, 26 January 1930, SCA94-GA64-4-111, Maines Pincock Family fonds, University of Waterloo Library, Special Collections and Archives, Waterloo, ON.

recognizable spirit, voice simultaneously functions as a de-personalized vibrational energy that supports the presencing of that spirit. The former requires the latter: spirit voices are generated from the voices of sitters, which are subject to invisible processes of harvesting, storage and re-composition. Ectoplasmic vocality therefore comprises a de-personalized collectivity within, and necessary to, a seemingly self-contained voice: a yield from combined vocal inputs that returns as a ghostly aggregate output, to which a distinct personhood is ascribed.

### 4.2 Representing the unrepresentable

Ectoplasm, "the invisible, … the intangible,"[101] is inextricably tied with attempts to represent it. The descriptions in the preceding section demonstrate the necessity for poetic invocations of simile and metaphor, such as Pincock's aforementioned radio analogies, for rendering this phenomena that resists description. Indeed, Bird notes that Walter's aforementioned use of the word "yarn" when communicating with sitters "admittedly constituted an attempt to put across, by analogy, ideas for which we on this side really have no words."[102] Researchers also undertook extensive efforts to capture ectoplasm visually, despite the difficulty posed by its solubility when exposed to light. A state-of-the-art camera set up was a permanent fixture in Hamilton's séance room, [103] and sittings were often structured according to the specific goal of producing an evidentiary photograph. The circle developed novel procedures for taking pictures in collaboration with Walter who, speaking via direct voice, provided the sitters with instructions to best capture the ectoplasmic structures used to generate that voice. The expansive archive of images of ectoplasm produced through Hamilton's experiments is emblematic of the

[101] Pincock, *Trails of Truth,* 16.
[102] Bird, "*Margery," The Medium*, 98.
[103] Hamilton demonstrated considerable expertise with state-of-the-art photographic equipment of the period, as he constructed a set up comprising 11 cameras and a remote-controlled device for releasing hand-packed magnesium flashes. See Keshavjee, "Experiments and Experiences in Psychical Research," 53.

tensions at work in séance photography: between a belief in the camera as a reliable and positivistic tool for registering phenomena invisible to the human eye, what Tom Gunning calls, "a guarantor of a new realm of visual certainty,"[104] and its parallel function in crafting inexplicable images that exceed an indexical relationship to reality, recording "appearances whose very fascination came from their apparent impossibility."[105] When it comes to ectoplasm, perhaps the only certainty is the impossibility of registering it completely or cohesively; Hamilton's attempts to expose occluded ectoplasmic energies were not only frequently unsuccessful,[106] but always necessarily partial or incomplete as the supernatural forces he sought to represent remain beyond a terrestrial scale or human understanding. In this regard, I understand ectoplasm as an aesthetic object—that which is constructed by processes that claim to merely represent it, that which emerges from "a making available of unavailabilities."[107]

In this section, I consider the ways that attempts to figure AI systems, including voice applications such as Alexa, similarly encounter this difficulty—of making intricate technical infrastructures and intangible processes legible in distinct and specific ways, and to greater or lesser, but always limited, degrees. The day-to-day appearances of AI transpire at the level of the interface which, in the case of Alexa, comprises the persona with whom users speak in order to execute commands. In *Deceitful Media,* Simone Natale suggests that such personas are key to carrying out what he terms "banal deception:" practices embedded within media technologies that support their integration into everyday life.[108] Such deception, which Natale suggests is characteristic of voice assistants, as well as AI applications more broadly, mobilizes "the all-too-

[104] Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations," 42.
[105] Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations," 68.
[106] Indeed, Hamilton's held 430 sittings between 1928-34, with only 50 culminating in photographs registering teleplasmic forms. See Letter from Thomas Glendenning Hamilton to Mr. Theodore Besterman.
[107] David Cecchetto, *Listening in the Afterlife of Data: Aesthetics, Pragmatics, and Incommunication* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 99.
[108] Simone Natale, *Deceitful Media*, 7.

human tendency to attribute agency to things or personality to voices."[109] The stereotypes that voice assistants evoke in their feminization—that of a secretary, personal assistant, or domestic labourer—therefore provide a social scaffolding that cues certain expectations and behaviours from users. Rather than crafting a convincing illusion that users are speaking to a human being, or even a being possessing human intelligence, voice assistants merely create the conditions for users to project a personality onto them. Natale suggests that Alexa's often synthetic-sounding voice relies on the imagination of its users to complete the representation, with Alexa's disembodied-ness further contributing to this activation of the user in sustaining the illusion of its identity and intelligence. Without a visual referent, "users imagine a source for the voice—and, subsequently, a stable character with whom to interact."[110] In this regard, Alexa's interface might be understood to anticipate the acousmatic question by offering a persona, a "who" that is speaking, that users can not only locate as the source for a sound, but that they can themselves construct based on the social cues embedded in Alexa's auditory design.

For Natale, Alexa's persona, co-created within the frame of the users' perception, comprises a "superficial level" of representation overlaid atop "the underlying mechanisms that are hidden under the surface," with this relation characterized as banal deception.[111] Natale seeks to excavate these underlying mechanisms, suggesting that voice assistants are "one and many at the same time;"[112] while the persona implies that Alexa comprises a self-contained "AI," is in fact an amalgam of numerous interconnected software systems that perform distinctive tasks. Indeed, Alexa's ability to converse with users is contingent upon several machine learning techniques working in concert with one another. While some basic "keyword spotting" transpires

[109] Natale, *Deceitful Media*, 7.
[110] Natale, *Deceitful Media*, 113.
[111] Natale, *Deceitful Media*, 109.
[112] Natale, *Deceitful Media*, 109.

locally on an Echo device, Alexa relies primarily on cloud-based systems. Once a voice command has been recognized as such by virtue of detecting a wake word (in most cases, this is simply "Alexa"), the recorded request is uploaded to Amazon's cloud server, where Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) algorithms convert the audio to text that can be analyzed using Natural Language Processing (NLP). Information retrieval algorithms gather the necessary details from the relevant data source to respond to a query, and TTS software generates an audio reply, which is sent back to the Echo device for playback. Recordings and transcripts from the transaction remain stored on Amazon's server following execution. [113]

In coining his central concept, Natale selects "deception" over other possible terms such as "illusion," in order to point towards the directed efforts of designers and developers to foster particular modes of consumer engagement with AI technologies; deception acknowledges the agency and agendas of big tech, highlighting the power dynamics at work within increasingly every-day or mundane interactions with AI.[114] Natale seeks to reject a binary understanding of deception, in which one might either be deceived or not deceived, and indeed stresses that users ought not be dismissed as passive or naïve.[115] Rather, the framework of banal deception permits varied and subtle degrees of investment and belief in the interface-level appearances of technologies. With regard to voice assistants specifically, Natale remarks "one can grasp perfectly that Alexa is "just" a piece of software and at the same time carry out socially meaningful exchanges with it."[116] Indeed, Alexa's voice, with its frequent glitches and lilting

[113] See "Follow the journey of a voice request," Amazon website, accessed May 24, 2023, http://www.amazon.ca/b/?node=23747239011.
[114] Natale, *Deceitful Media*, 9-10.
[115] Natale, *Deceitful Media*, 6-7.
[116] Natale, *Deceitful Media*, 114.

intonation, comprises a not-like resemblance to a human speaker, yet approximates interpersonal conversation just well enough for users to ascribe sociality to their interactions with it.

Despite these caveats, I suggest that Natale's framework forecloses a more nuanced understanding of the problem of representing AI systems, since describing human-computer interaction in terms of deception nonetheless implies that what he calls the "superficial level" of the interface comprises a falsehood—as if there were some more honest way for users to engage with AI systems, as if a software interface could be anything other than an aesthetic representation. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun reminds us, the "age when one could see and comprehend the actions of our computers" are "long gone."[117] A more urgent critical move, therefore, rather than decrying interfaces as instruments of false consciousness, is to attend to the ways that they attempt to articulate inarticulable substructures, thereby crafting and specifying relationships between users and computational systems, or rather, incanting tenuous similes that construct real relations. Interfaces, and indeed any attempt to render digital technologies legible to human users, comprise acts of "mapping and metaphor" which "create the world they represent."[118] While Natale's rendering of Alexa as "one and many" highlights software processes that are occluded by the interface, his formulation of speech processing, NLP, and information retrieval is also an aesthetic figuration. Indeed, he explains the multiplicity that comprise Alexa's one-ness with reference to the holy trinity of Christian theological tradition, [119] invoking this familiar symbolic trope as a means to make legible systems whose scale and operation are difficult to grasp. Natale's work is therefore not simply a matter of unveiling the

[117] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 2013), 92.
[118] Chun, *Programmed Visions,* 94.
[119] Natale, *Deceitful Media*, 108.

"true" structures beneath the veneer of Alexa's persona, an antidote to banal deception, but is of course an act of world-building in its own right.

While the "one and many" formulation expounds a crucial dimension of Alexa's functionality, I wish to contrast Natale's figuration with Kate Crawford and Vladen Joler's *Anatomy of an AI System* (2018), an artwork and accompanying essay that represent the many, many, many components of software, hardware, infrastructure, data, and labour necessary for a seemingly simple exchange with Alexa. From top to bottom, the sprawling diagram charts the processes and resources necessary to fulfil a voice request, while from left to right, it maps the lifecycle of an Echo smart speaker—from the mining and refining of rare earth minerals, to the manufacture and assembly of the device, to its ultimate disposal and after-life as e-waste. *Anatomy of an AI System* is a visualization that attempts to account for the globally dispersed yet interconnected systems and supply chains, as well as the human and planetary costs, associated with untouched vocal interactions with smart tech. Indeed, Crawford and Joler's map provides a critical annotated counterpoint to the seven-step flow chart on Amazon's website that explains how Alexa works to non-expert users by inviting them to "follow the journey of a voice request."[120] In Amazon's telling, for instance, voice commands are "sent to Amazon's secure cloud,"[121] whereas Crawford and Joler demonstrate that such data transfers require internet infrastructures such as routers, exchange points, and submarine cables, and that the cloud itself comprises Amazon Web Services (AWS) servers and data centers. Such detailed rendering not only makes apparent the extractive material underpinning of AI, but the necessity of human

[120] "Follow the journey of a voice request."
[121] "Follow the journey of a voice request."

labour in upholding every element of this infrastructure—from assembly line workers, to network technicians, to crowdworkers preparing training data.

Crawford and Joler are, like Natale, concerned with hidden processes, and indeed seek to aid their audience to "grasp [their] scale and scope" in order to "understand and govern the technical infrastructures that thread through our lives."[122] However, as an art object, *Anatomy of an AI System* wrestles with, and makes apparent, the difficulty of precisely this task. I invoke *Anatomy of an AI System* here not as a more accurate or truthful account of the systems underpinning Alexa, and not only to affirm the political and ethical significance of addressing the teeming plurality of processes, and numerous cites of extraction and exploitation, that comprise those systems; beyond the critical gesture of exposing banal deception, *Anatomy of an AI System* comprises an aesthetic creation, a self-reflexive world-making through mapping and metaphor as it seeks to represent phenomena that exceed representation.

As Crawford and Joler describe, the work attempts to "grasp [the] immensity and complexity" of a system whose scale is "almost beyond human imagining." Even in its intricate detail, *Anatomy of an AI System* is a necessarily simplified and expurgated representation, depicting "only the barest anatomical outline."[123] By approaching an Echo device anatomically, Crawford and Joler craft an analogy between their own critical and creative project and practices of dissecting and diagramming the body—of separating out interconnected parts of an organism in order to understand their relationship to one another, of crafting orderly representations of often messy systems. The "exploded view"[124] associated with this anatomical approach therefore

[122] Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler. "Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo As An Anatomical Map of Human Labor, Data and Planetary Resources." September 7, 2018. https://anatomyof.ai.
[123] Crawford and Joler, "Anatomy of an AI System."
[124] Crawford and Joler, "Anatomy of an AI System."

simultaneously attends to the systems as a whole, figuring Alexa as one and inarticulable many. This inarticulability is not only an issue of quantity, breadth, and magnitude, but also opacities and incomprehension among the various actors that comprise the system: supply chains are opaque even to corporations that operate them,[125] and just as the impacts of natural resource mining can take decades to emerge, the long-term costs associated with data mining remain as yet unknown.[126] *Anatomy of an AI System* therefore serves the dual function of both articulating the system and articulating its inarticulability.

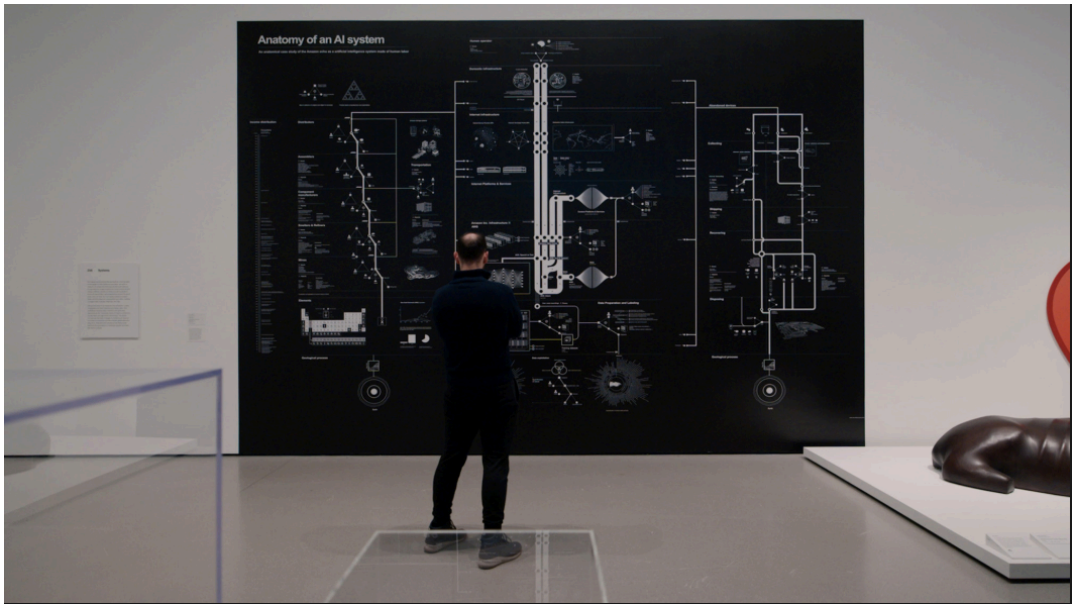


Figure 19: Kate Crawford and Vladen Joler, *Anatomy of an AI System* (2018), installation view at MoMA.

[125] Crawford provides the example of Intel, for whom it took more than four years to understand the supply line for its microprocessor products to ensure that it was conflict-free; see Crawford and Joler, "Anatomy of an AI System."
[126] Kate Crawford, "This Beautiful Map Shows Everything That Powers an Amazon Echo, from Data Mines to Lakes of Lithium," interview by James Vincent, *The Verge*, September 9, 2018. https://www.theverge.com/2018/9/9/17832124/ai-artificial-intelligence-supply-chain-anatomy-of-ai-kate-crawford-interview.

The work been displayed numerous times in galleries and arts venues including the Victoria and Albert Museum (2018), Ars Electronica festival (2019), and MoMA, where it remains on display as part of the permanent collection [Figure 19]. The piece is consistently exhibited as a large-scale wall decal, dwarfing viewers who approach it to read the still miniscule text. This experience is mimicked for viewers who encounter the artwork as a PDF available for download—an exercise that compels drastic zooming in and out, since magnifying the image such that the text in a single node becomes readable necessarily obscures the rest of the network. A screen-based encounter with *Anatomy of an AI System* is characterized by prolonged scrolling, inching along connecting lines, and oscillating between different degrees of magnification. In a gallery, such in-depth engagement requires that viewers crouch down to the floor and stretch to the tips of their toes to reach text beyond their sight lines. In order to "zoom in," viewers are required to physically approach the work in ways that push the limits of gallery etiquette and regulations making a complete reading of the map unlikely, if not impossible. I don't mean to suggest that the work is unsuccessful in this regard, but rather that the intractability of specifying the many that comprise Alexa is made palpable. Even in this distilled diagrammatic representation, the AI system that comprises Alexa is pointedly irreducible to a human scale.

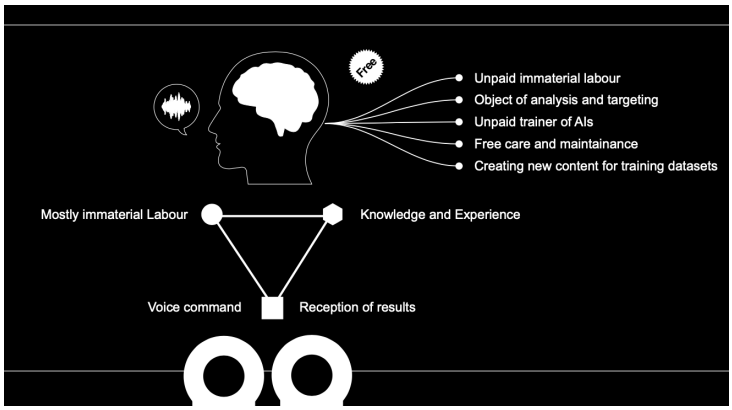


Figure 20: Kate Crawford and Vladen Joler, *Anatomy of an AI System* (2018), detail.

Although viewers might struggle to take in *Anatomy of an AI System* in its entirety, they might be able to locate themselves at various points within it. The artwork interpellates viewers as users of an Echo device, situating a "human operator" at the top and centre of the diagram as the source of the activating input and the recipient of the generated output [Figure 20]. However, Crawford and Joler immediately specify that the user is more than a spectator to a deceitful illusion, describing them as an "unpaid trainer of AIs," engaged in the immaterial labour of "creating new content for training datasets."[127] In this figuration, user participation is not limited to interface level interaction or an act of projection that fleshes out a low-definition media event. Crawford and Joler seek to represent the ways that vocal inputs from the user are gathered for future, and often undisclosed, purposes, becoming part of the material infrastructure of the system: "voice commands are collected, analyzed, and retained for the purposes of building an ever-larger corpus of human voices and instructions."[128] Indeed, user voices can be located all along the central axis of *Anatomy of an AI System*—not only as commands being processed at an Amazon data center, but as recordings stored in perpetuity, analyzed and labelled by algorithms or low-paid human workers, and put to use as training data.

Crawford and Joler posit that it is the "multiple identity" of the user, which they liken to a chimera of a consumer, worker, resource, and product, [129] that distinguishes the extractive processes of AI. [130] I would add to this statement that not only do individual users hold multiple identities within the system, but users are necessarily multiple. Alexa is also a chimera; the vocal interface is comprised of, and itself occludes, a vast collective of users whose data is necessary

[127] Crawford and Joler, "Anatomy of an AI System."
[128] Crawford and Joler, "Anatomy of an AI System."
[129] Crawford and Joler, "Anatomy of an AI System."
[130] Crawford, "This Beautiful Map Shows Everything That Powers an Amazon Echo."

for Alexa's functioning and continued refining.[131] Even as Alexa hails its users into seemingly one-on-one conversations, users themselves comprise an innumerable many that are already enmeshed in the architecture of the system. Alexa's voice, like the voices of spirits in the séance, manifests as a singular entity while being crafted from the collective vocal contributions of those who engage with it; an instantiation of ectoplasmic vocality in the sense that voice is simultaneous constructed as product and as resource, as end and means, as personal, impersonal, and more-than personal all at once.

### 4.3 Who is this (for)?

In this chapter thus far, I have advocated for an approach to vocality that problematizes the "who" of the acousmatic question ("who is this?), in order to consider vocal ways of being beyond a foregone conflation with embodied oral utterance, subjectivity, and self-contained one-ness. While ectoplasmic vocality is useful in articulating the collective structure of AI vocalizations, the concept can, of course, only go so far as to open out into the political project of naming the unseen agencies at work in AI systems and identifying the stakes of this process of vocal extraction. To that end, I now wish to reorient my discussion of AI vocalities according to Jonathan Sterne and Mehak Sawnhey's critical intervention in this framework, based on their observation that the acousmatic question is increasingly delegated to and posed by machine listening technologies. [132] Speech and voice recognition applications (like Alexa, among numerous others), as well as tools for lie detection and medical diagnosis, are asking "who is

[131] For other similarly aligned accounts of more-than human collaborations that comprise AI voices, see Steph Ceraso, "Voice as Ecology: Voice Donation, Materiality, Identity," *Sounding Out!* (blog), September 6, 2022, https://soundstudiesblog.com/2022/09/06/voice-as-ecology-voice-donation-materiality-identity/; Ramati, "Algorithmic Ventriloquism," 1-10.
[132] Jonathan Sterne and Mehak Sawhney, "The Acousmatic Question and the Will to Datafy," *Kalfou* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2022): 289.

this?" of their users—converting voices into data and subjecting that data to classification and analysis via machine learning.[133] Such systems attend to voice as "a repertoire of information that can be algorithmically decomposed to obtain multiple kinds of data."[134] The vocalities, or ways of being for voice, constructed in and by machine learning are therefore defined by this process of statistical quantification, monitoring, and prediction. The work of projecting meaning and ascribing identity onto voices is not only carried out by users confronting a vocal interface, but is equally, and consequentially, performed by AI systems listening to their users. In order to guide critical inquiries into the politics and power dynamics at stake in machine listening, Sterne and Sawnhey take up a modified version of the acousmatic question, asking "who is this for?" [135] Who is being served by this datafication of voice?

Across Amazon's expansive range of platforms and products, the company barely obfuscates the degree to which it captures and analyzes user data, instead framing surveillance as a benefit to consumers—a means to provide better, more personalized service.[136] With regard to Alexa, Amazon's marketing materials enumerate the features afforded by gathering and storing recordings of users' vocal interactions. Descriptions in Amazon's "Privacy Centre," available to consumers on its public-facing website, corroborate Crawford and Joler's account of the ways that recordings of user interactions are used to improve Alexa's speech capabilities.[137] The

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[133] For more discussion on the processes and stakes of machine listening, see Domenico Napolitano and Renato Grieco, "The Folded Space of Machine Listening," *SoundEffects: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* 10, no. 1 (January 15, 2021): 173–89; James EK Parker and Sean Dockray, "'All Possible Sounds': Speech, Music, and the Emergence of Machine Listening." *Sound Studies* 9, no. 2 (July 3, 2023): 253–81; and Jonathan Sterne, "Is Machine Listening Listening?,"1-4.

[134] Sterne and Sawhney, "The Acousmatic Question and the Will to Datafy," 291.

[135] Sterne and Sawhney, "The Acousmatic Question and the Will to Datafy," 303.

[136] West, *Buy Now*, 109-110.

[137] It is possible for users to review and delete voice recordings individually or in bulk by date-range using the Alexa app, or choose to have all voice recordings automatically deleted after a request has been processed. The default, however, is for voice recordings to be stored in perpetuity. Crucially, tech companies are aware that default settings play an enormous role in uptake, as the recent antitrust case again Google in the U.S. makes clear. See David McCabe, "'Google is a Monopolist,' Judge Rules in Landmark Antitrust Case," *New York Times*, August 5, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/05/technology/google-antitrust-ruling.html.

company concedes that "we use your Alexa requests to train our speech recognition and natural language understanding systems using machine learning" so that Alexa can "get smarter and more helpful … every day."[138] They suggest that allowing Alexa to use voice recordings ameliorates the user experience by making it possible for Alexa to identify individual users by their voices. Users are prompted to set up a voice ID profile by asking Alexa to "learn my voice" and providing vocal replies to a series of questions; Alexa is then able distinguish between the voices of regular users, call them by their names, and provide more customized responses. Amazon also suggests greater access to user data results in improved accuracy and ease of use, as Alexa learns to better interpret an individual's use habits and speech patterns: "over time, Alexa can adapt to your way of speaking—your cadences, your vocal quirks, and the many words and phrases you like to use."[139] By describing this affordance not only in terms of improved comprehension and greater ease of use, but in terms of personal inflection patterns and "quirks," Amazon frames machine listening as a means for Alexa to know it's users more intimately.

[138] "Creating a more personalized and inclusive experience," Amazon website, Accessed September 12, 2024, https://www.amazon.com/b?node=99608000011.
[139] "Creating a more personalized and inclusive experience."


Figure 21: Screenshot from Amazon Alexa website.

Beyond pitching the datafication of voice to users as the key to honing one's own algorithmic profile, Amazon also suggests that such processes improve the system more broadly. The company makes an altruistic appeal to users to permit the use of their voice recordings as training data as way to craft a more "inclusive experience," explaining that "requests from a diverse range of customers help Alexa understand everyone better—people with all kinds of speech patterns, accents, and dialects."[140] Indeed, the website graphic features a cluster of several cartoon figures posing questions to Alexa [Figure 21]; included in the group are people with different skin tones, a child, a woman wearing a hijab, and a man seemingly wearing a hearing aid. Implicit in Amazon's framing of this use of recorded interactions as way to build larger and more diverse speech corpora is a tacit acknowledgment of, and seeming desire to rectify, its failures in this arena to date. Indeed, Alexa often fails to comprehend the commands from users

[140] "Creating a more personalized and inclusive experience."

with speech disabilities,[141] is more likely to misunderstand users speaking with non-native accents,[142] and demonstrates a dramatically higher error rate when responding to Black users compared with white.[143][144] The solution seemingly posited by Amazon, indeed by many of the tech researchers who identify these disparities,[145] is to build more diverse training sets. Sterne and Sawnhey, however, suggest that such efforts ought to be understood within a broader "will to datafy"—a "techno-capitalist desire of perpetual datafication, where data might be monetizable at a future point in time, while this drive rests on narratives such as those of access and inclusion."[146] While a more diverse speech corpora might make Alexa more accessibile for some users, I contend, in keeping with Sterne and Sawnhey, that Amazon foregrounds inclusivity as an ethical alibi for what remains an extractivist project.[147]

Crucially, Sterne and Sawnhey point out that larger and seemingly more comprehensive or inclusive datasets cannot guarantee the certainty of the vocal appraisals made via machine listening: "the output of voice analysis is always a probabilistic guess, a statistical approximation of the emotion or identity the voice supposedly possess."[148] AI vocalities therefore introduce yet

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[141] Moira Corcoran, "When Alexa Can't Understand You," *Slate*, October 16, 2018, https://slate.com/technology/2018/10/voice-assistants-alexa-siri-speech-disabilities-recognition.html.
[142] Drew Harwell, "The Accent Gap." *Washington Post*, July 19, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/business/alexa-does-not-understand-your-accent/.
[143] Allison Koenecke et al., "Racial Disparities in Automated Speech Recognition," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 14 (April 7, 2020): 7684–89.
[144] All of the above studies are refer to the US English language version of Alexa. Since Alexa, and other prominent commercial voice assistants, are optimized for use in standardized varieties of English and trained using English-language data, this results in numerous glitches in its other language options. See, for example, Didem Leblebici, "'You Are Apple, Why Are You Speaking to Me in Turkish?': The Role of English in Voice Assistant Interactions," *Multilingua* 43, no. 4 (July 26, 2024): 455–85.
[145] Indeed, this solution is proposed in the three studies cited above; see Corcoran, "When Alexa Can't Understand You;" Harwell, "The Accent Gap;" and Koenecke et al., "Racial Disparities in Automated Speech Recognition."
[146] Sterne and Sawnhey, "The Acousmatic Question and the Will to Datafy," 296.
[147] For an account of the longstanding relationship between automatic speech recognition and datafication, see Xiaochang Li, "'There's No Data Like More Data': Automatic Speech Recognition and the Making of Algorithmic Culture," *Osiris* 38 (July 1, 2023): 165–82.
[148] Sterne and Sawnhey, "The Acousmatic Question and the Will to Datafy," 292.

another not-like resemblance between users and their data, as algorithmic identities are formed and reformed according to measurable types that can be operationalized for the purposes of marketing or surveillance.[149] The categorization carried out through voice recognition flattens out the often nuanced relationship between voice and identity; it "thins the thick vocal event"[150] in its attempts to assess the race, gender, ethnicity, or emotional disposition of the speaker. Yet despite the impossibility of truly knowing the user, the statistical profiles created via machine listening and the datafication of voice are increasingly treated as certainties, and indeed open and foreclose possibilities within the lived experience of the user.

Machine listening systems, and the ways that they make purportedly impartial and indisputable inferences about their users, therefore resonate with séance practices insofar as both comprise truth procedures heavily inflected with fiction, faith, and aesthetic renderings of phenomena that exceed capture. Voice is made knowable in and through systems invested in mechanical objectivity and rationality; much like séances, technologies of datafication operate, according to Sun-ha Hong, "as a panoply of fantasies" that "help drag impossible functions and nonexistent relation into the realm of the sayable and thinkable."[151] To think about AI vocality as ectoplasmic—to draw the knowledge systems that construct datafied sound into resonance with the strange and incredible aesthetic practices of séance photography—is to trouble the certainties they promise, while acknowledging their performativity. As Hong explains, "fantasy takes half a step outside present reality not to escape from it but to all the more effectively guide it."[152]

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[149] See Cheney-Lippold, John. *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017.
[150] Sterne and Sawnhey, "The Acousmatic Question and the Will to Datafy," 291.
[151] Sun-ha Hong, *Technologies of Speculation: The Limits of Knowledge in a Data-Driven Society*. (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 14-15.
[152] Hong, *Technologies of Speculation*, 15.

Bringing ectoplasm and AI vocality into resonance with one another might, however, act as a preliminary worlding gesture—creating a critical architecture for attuning to the fictions and not-like representations that animate techno-logics of truth.

## 5. Conclusion: There are no dead

For artist Wesley Goatley, Amazon Echo devices "already feel old … they were old kind of immediately."[1] Despite the proliferation of smart speakers into the homes of consumers over the last decade, the initial adulation and excitement about Alexa, and the "smart" future it foretold, has waned, as the product has failed to keep pace with consumer expectations.[2] Indeed, Amazon's own data suggest that engagement drops precipitously among new users only two weeks after acquiring an Echo.[3] The devices themselves are sold at or below cost, and often given away for free as a means to enmesh users in Amazon's ecosystem, in anticipation of ultimately profitable data transactions[4]—a business model that has seemingly yet to yield substantial returns.[5] Goatley has also observed the frequency with which older Echo models are thrown away or sold for parts: first-generation Echo devices, which retailed for £149.99 upon their UK release in 2016,[6] are now readily available on eBay for £3-5 each.[7]

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[1] Wesley Goatley, interview by Alex Borkowski, May 23, 2023.
[2] Jennifer Pattison Tuohy, "Alexa, Where's My Star Trek Computer?" The Verge, October 30, 2024, https://www.theverge.com/24282710/amazon-alexa-ai-star-trek-computer-10-years-assistant.
[3] Jennimai Nguyen, "Turns out, No One Wants to Talk to Amazon's Alexa," Mashable, December 23, 2021, https://mashable.com/article/amazon-alexa-usage-drop.
[4] West, *Buy Now*, 123.
[5] Ron Amadeo, "Amazon Alexa Is a 'Colossal Failure,' on Pace to Lose $10 Billion This Year," Ars Technica, November 21, 2022, https://arstechnica.com/gadgets/2022/11/amazon-alexa-is-a-colossal-failure-on-pace-to-lose-10-billion-this-year/.
[6] Samuel Gibbs, "Amazon Launches Echo Voice-Controlled Speaker and Alexa Assistant in the UK." *The Guardian*, September 14, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/sep/14/amazon-echo-voice-controlled-speaker-alexa-assistant-uk.
[7] Goatley interview.

Figure 22: Wesley Goatley, *Newly Forgotten Technologies*, 2024. Installation view at Science Gallery London

The practice of procuring and repurposing the hardware of broken and discarded smart devices is a pillar of Goatley's art practice.[8] For his installation *Newly Forgotten Technologies* (2023), Goatley transformed Science Gallery London into an e-waste dump: laying to rest 200 discarded smart devices, including smartphones, tablets, and smart speakers, in mounds of earth on the gallery floor. As a result of Goatley's tinkering,[9] the voice assistants housed within the devices were made to recite scripted stories of their imagined disposal, recounting speculative futures in which the promises associated with smart tech, and indeed AI more broadly, have not been fulfilled. Goatley describes the installation—a darkened room illuminated by cracked screens and the circular lights of first-generation Echo devices—as "an environment haunted by

[8] Other artworks that deploy the same materials and method include *The Dark Age of Connectionism* (2017) and *Newly Forgotten Technologies: Five Echoes* (2022).
[9] Goatley has developed a bespoke method of exploiting the Alexa Developer Console to make use of Alexa voices as a TTS interface without circulating data to Amazon. Wesley Goatley, "Generative Sound AI Workshop" (Centre for Culture and Technology, University of Toronto, May 10, 2024).

civilization's trash"—confronting a Global North audience with the state of technological decay (or rather lack of decay) that exists "out of sight of the consumers these devices were intended for."[10] Goatley observes that "the lifespan of their usefulness to humans ... is very short compared to their material lifespan: the long time of the breakdown of the silicone, the lithium, the plastic."[11] Working with discarded smart speakers therefore comprises an attempt to make something with objects that have come from the earth at great expense, and to intercept their swift return to it as indelible trash.[12]

*Newly Forgotten Technologies* comprises a graveyard for material objects, but also for unrealized techno-futures. Goatley notes that not only do Echoes have short lives in the homes of their user but also that "the future they promised was very short lived."[13] Despite the promises of seamless voice control, the enmagicked smart home, and companionate AI, in practice Alexa is primarily deployed to fairly mundane ends like playing music or setting timers,[14] prompting critics to call the device "a glorified clock radio."[15] Not only does the promise of a highly intelligent and emotionally responsive voice user interface remain unrealized, but it is no longer the primary cultural touchstone for understanding the affordances of AI. LLMs, which users engage primarily via text-based chat interface, set the current standard for what AI can do and how people might interact with it. In response, Amazon has developed Alexa+: "a next

[10] "Newly Forgotten Technologies - Wesley Goatley," accessed August 14, 2025, https://www.wesleygoatley.com/newly-forgotten-technologies.html.
[11] Wesley Goatley, interview by Alex Borkowski, May 23, 2023.
[12] Goatley, "Generative Sound AI Workshop."
[13] Goatley interview.
[14] Nguyen, "Turns out, No One Wants to Talk to Amazon's Alexa."
[15] Jake Swearingen, "Amazon Thought Alexa Would Be the next iPhone. Turns out It's a 'Glorified Clock Radio,'" Business Insider, November 30, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-alexa-business-failure-10-bn-losses-2022-11.

generation assistant powered by generative AI,"[16] which began an early access roll-out in June 2025 to (so far) mixed reviews. [17] In addition to promises of more easeful conversations, improved personalization, and more seamless and ubiquitous integrations, promotional material for Alexa+ also highlights user ability to interact with it not only vocally but textually—not just via Echo device, but via chat interface in a smart phone app or web browser (much like ChatGPT).[18]

Even as Amazon pivots its products, investments,[19] and promotional material away from voice user interfaces, I am not prepared to sound the death knell for the promise that "the future is voice." Indeed, ChatGPT's Advanced Voice Mode, which OpenAI began to roll out in late 2024, is already being lauded in similar terms as those used to market Alexa—more natural, more human, and more intuitive than typing.[20] Much like the hardware of the Echo device that never truly disappears, techno-imaginaries persist even as they slip away from the foreground of public-facing discourse. As Sun-ha Hong describes: "IoT and smart technologies have been constantly feted as the next big thing, then cast aside as disappointed hype—only to be revived again […] at every juncture, past predictions and achievements are reassessed to naturalize the promises of the present."[21] Alexa+ attests to this pattern of revivification with regard to the

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[16] Panos Panay, "Introducing Alexa+, the next Generation of Alexa," About Amazon, February 26, 2025, https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/devices/new-alexa-generative-artificial-intelligence.
[17] See Kathryn Rath, "I Got Early Access to Amazon's New Gen AI Alexa+. Things Got Weird." *The New York Times*, June 12, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/wirecutter/reviews/alexa-plus-gen-ai-preview/.
[18] "Alexa+," Amazon.com, accessed August 14, 2025, https://www.amazon.com/dp/amazon.com/dp/B0DCCNHWV5.
[19] The Alexa Fund, Amazon's venture capital initiative initially intended to back innovations in voice tech, announced in 2025 that it would be expanding its scope to include AI hardware and generative media more broadly. See "Learn about Amazon's Alexa Fund and Its Expanded Investment Scope," Amazon Developer website (blog), March 26, 2025, https://developer.amazon.com/en-US/blogs/alexa/alexa-skills-kit/2025/03/alexa-funds-announcement.html.
[20] Nelson Aguilar, "ChatGPT's Voice Feature Makes It Feel More Human Than Ever," CNET, June 27, 2025, https://www.cnet.com/tech/services-and-software/chatgpts-voice-feature-makes-it-feel-more-human-than-ever/.
[21] Hong, "Technofutures in Stasis," 1946.

gendering of smart tech. While Amazon's guidelines for developers continue to stress that Alexa has no gender, and forbid the use of gendered pronouns in designing and promoting third-party skills,[22] the company's news release introduces Alexa+ as a woman: "your new personal AI assistant that gets things done—she's smarter, more conversational, more capable, and free with Prime."[23] Femininity, which never left in the first place, returns once again to ground and make legible AI futures. When it comes to techno-imaginaries, Alexa demonstrates that there is no death[24]—a profoundly Spiritualist proposal.

In this dissertation, I have sought to demonstrate the ways that Alexa not only revives and revises histories of the séance—as it engenders (non)bodies and incredible voices—but also works *like* a séance as it recursively conjures the past to craft the future, both discursively and through the operations of big data and machine learning. Goatley's art practice is an exercise in working with the enduring material residues of forgotten, defunct, or outmoded tech, as well as the unrealized futures that accompany them. I too believe that attending to the persistence of the pasts that underscore the future-oriented thrust of AI exuberance might provide materials for thinking beyond techno-capitalist inevitabilities.

[22] "The Alexa Personality."
[23] Panay, "Introducing Alexa+, the next Generation of Alexa."
[24] Pincock, *Trails of Truth*, 12.

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