Materiality

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DANIEL Hack writes that "*materiality* and its cognates are often used with a vagueness that blurs distinctions."[1] Perhaps, then, we should examine this hazy term through the blurriest of beings, the ghost. Victorian spiritualists repeatedly ran against what Jacques Derrida terms the "paradox of incorporation"[2] as they had to explain the materialization of spirit forms in a domain in which materiality was a tricky concept. It was one thing to claim that spirits could inhabit and animate a solid object like a table, or appear in transparent form on a photographic plate, and quite another to argue that spirits were capable of manifesting themselves in palpable bodies. These apparitions ranged from detached spirit hands to, beginning in the early 1870s, full spirit bodies, all of which looked and felt like the real thing. One sitter who attended a séance with the medium Douglas Home, for instance, claims to have felt a spirit hand that "was a soft, warm, fleshy, radiant, substantial hand, such as I should be glad to feel at the extremity of the friendship of my best friends."[3]

From one perspective, spectral bodies afforded the (more or less) concrete evidence that spiritualists needed to prove their claims of an afterlife. According to James Burns, a devoted follower of the movement, "Take away from Spiritualism the physical manifestations and we would soon be in that cloudland of vague doctrine which prevailed before the advent of these manifestations."[4] From another perspective, however, these apparitions threatened to challenge spiritualists' dismissal of the idea of resurrection, which entailed a revivification of the material body. Instead, they believed that the soul would continue to exist apart from the body, but would find alternate ways of becoming embodied during a séance. In an 1869 article for the *Spiritual Magazine,* Rev. William Mountford writes that although "Spiritualism is properly the antithesis of materialism," the soul can find ways of manifesting after death, as seen in the "hands of spirit, which had been materialized as to surface at least, and which had thereby been made capable of looking and doing, for a little while and for some little purposes, like hands of flesh and blood."[5]

Mountford's account implies that spirit hands and bodies resembled—but could not actually *be*—flesh and blood. Victorian spiritualists thus found themselves tasked with redefining materiality as something that hovered

between the tangible and the intangible. In a piece for *Human Nature* titled, "After All, Is There Any Such Thing as Matter?" the medium William Stainton Moses experiments with a new way of thinking about materiality. Describing how he had been grabbed by a "substantial hand of flesh and blood" during a séance, he continues, "Whence came that hand? It was solid, as I understand solidity; warm, according to my ideas of temperature. It was, in all respects, a human hand, save in one material point—*It could not possibly have been attached to a human body.*"[6] Moses tries to resolve this problem by proposing that matter might be different than what it is generally held to be: "A long course of pondering on such as these have led me to entertain disrespectful ideas of Matter, as a vague, shifty, illusory sort of thing which I could not get hold of in any way, though it is generally supposed to be the only thing which one *can* get hold of at all. I have even begun to question whether we are not all wrong about it, and whether, in effect, there is any such thing at all."[7] His deliberations escalate into a radical redefinition of materiality, adeptly shifting it into a lesser category of believability than the ghost. While it is conceivable to grasp a spirit's hand, it may no longer be possible to get a hold of what matter is.

Victorian spiritualists provided a model for such negotiations of materiality in their accounts of *how* spirits labored to manufacture forms through which they could appear to sitters. As Epes Sargent explains, spirits must "reproduce certain *fac-similes* of [their] appearance while in the earth-life."[8] There were several theories about how such modes of self-representation could be carried out, one of the most popular being that spirits would collect particles of matter from séance sitters and refashion them into temporary bodies. According to one account, "The refined matter out of which these apparitions were formed . . . was gathered from the individuals composing the circle, each contributing to the supply. The raw material was then collected together in a mass—as the housewife, having kneaded the dough for bread, prepares it to be rolled out into any form desired—and a certain portion (sufficient for the manifestations about to be made) divided from it."[9] Unlike raw materials used in manufacture, which Marx argues, "lose the independent form with which they entered into the labour process,"[10] material atoms are ultimately returned to their living owners once spirits have completed their manifestations. The matter's journey from real human bodies, to the abstract realm of spirit bodies, and back to the human captures the instability of materiality in a spiritualist context. More broadly, the process provides a model in miniature, enabled by the supernatural, of the intellectual and social labor expended in efforts to "grasp" the concept of materiality

during the Victorian period. Based on our current preoccupation with defining what we mean when we talk about Victorian materiality through "thing theory" and other object-based methodologies, this labor continues to haunt us today.

Notes

1. Daniel Hack, *The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 1.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.
3. Verax [J. J. G. Wilkinson], "Evenings with Mr. Home and the Spirits," *Spiritual Herald* (February 1856): 5.
4. J[ames]Burns, "The Work of the Spiritualist, and How to Do It?" *Medium and Daybreak*, November 17, 1876, 722–23.
5. Rev. W. Mountford, "Thoughts on Spiritualism," *Spiritual Magazine* (November 1869): 481–82.
6. M. A. Oxon [William Stainton Moses], "After All, Is There Any Such Thing as Matter?" *Human Nature* (May 1877): 194.
7. Oxon, "After All," 194.
8. Epes Sargent, *The Proof Palpable of Immortality*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1881), 21.
9. "How Do Spirits Make Themselves Visible?" *Spiritual Magazine* (June 1872): 256.
10. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), 311.

Media

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ALTHOUGH the term "media" postdates the Victorian period, Victorian culture was suffused with media. In fact, mediation, broadly defined, was a defining aesthetic of the period, and one could argue that the field of media studies properly begins with the nineteenth century.