

# Science of the Seance

## Transnational Networks and Gendered Bodies in the Study of Psychic Phenomena, 1918–40

BETH A. ROBERTSON



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# Groping in the Dark: An Introduction

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This world is a laboratory of souls, a forcing ground  
where the material refines out the spiritual.  
– Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*<sup>1</sup>

The subject of this study remains wedged between discourses of science and religion, matter and mind, materialism and metaphysics. Examining a twentieth-century network of psychical researchers, mediums, and spirits, I argue that the study of paranormal phenomena was not some bizarre digression in a progressively secular world. Rather, experimentation with the limits of death was intimately connected to the culture of its era. Interest in the paranormal has often been relegated to the nineteenth century, a supposition that is buttressed by a wealth of literature dedicated to Victorian spiritualism. From Marlene Tromp and Molly McGarry to Pamela Thurschwell and many more, these authors have demonstrated that spirit seeking was formative of nineteenth-century society.<sup>2</sup> Yet the practice of investigating what lies beyond the grave did not diminish but gained momentum following the outbreak of the First World War. Situated along the fault lines of science and spirituality, matter and the psyche, the twentieth-century seance was much more than a continuation of nineteenth-century preoccupations. Just as empiricism, technology, perception, gender, class, race, and the body were being reconstructed in this period, so too did the seance experience a radical shift.

This book contends that interwar psychical researchers, mediums, and spirits did not simply mimic but engaged with and ultimately transformed

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broader cultural conceptions of empiricism and technological praxis, as well as gendered, class, and racial power within the confines of the seance. Investments in particular kinds of embodiment remained key to such reconfigurations, providing the means by which interwar ideals of scientific authority could be affirmed, as well as displaced and disassembled. Investigators laboured to construct a science of the paranormal by reformulating spiritual encounters into measurable and discernible traces. Representing themselves as scientific and rational, psychical researchers shaped the practice of communing with the dead into an empirical exercise. The dark seance room had been a space in which the earthly encountered the supernatural to reveal another plane of existence. In the hands of twentieth-century psychical researchers, however, the seance became a laboratory of rigorous experimentation. Investigators honed their own senses, used technology, and employed psychological and medical methods. They positioned mediums and ghosts as the embodied evidence of preternatural realities. In the process, investigators, psychics, and spirits became entangled in a gendered and sexual politics that dictated who was to have power over whom. Although researchers endeavoured to maintain a sense of masculine authority, mediums and spirits did not always comply with their experimenters, blurring the lines between scientist and subject, male and female, body and spirit. Refusing to be passive bystanders of the scientific project as it unfolded in the interwar seance room, mediums and spirits wrestled with their investigators to reshape the contours of empiricism. Their participation marked a fundamental breakdown of cultural authority as it was defined within interwar society, their embodied performances reflecting back an image of phallic prowess that undermined its ability to wield power in the first place.

THE UNRAVELLED KNOT: TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS,  
SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOURS, AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

This study focuses on a network of psychical investigators that extended across Canada, the United States, and Britain from 1918 to 1940. Like other transnational histories, it aims “to move beyond a national framework of analysis” in order “to explore connections between peoples, societies and events usually thought of as distinct and separate.”<sup>3</sup> Although rooted in distinct national and geographical contexts, these individuals maintained their associations across substantial distances, sharing methods, technologies, mediums, and even spirits. Whether in New York or Boston, in

St. Catharines, Ontario, or Winnipeg, Manitoba, or in London, England, these investigators and the mediums they studied significantly contributed to the project of psychical research in the interwar era.

Some of the researchers and mediums of this network have been studied individually by scholars. What have been overlooked are the links that existed between them. Rather than viewing these investigations through a strictly nationalist lens, and thus regarding them as isolated and disconnected, I draw these sources together. Although they were not the only ones probing the spirits at this time, I have focused on these particular researchers and mediums because they demonstrated the intricate, transnational patterns of communication and collaboration that developed around the pursuit of the paranormal. Through such a network, psychical researchers and mediums legitimized their pursuits as they established alliances across Canada, the United States, and Britain.

This network included an extraordinary medium, Mina Stinson Crandon, or “Margery,” as she became known. She originally hailed from Canada but was living in Boston when she first discovered her gifts. Le Roi Crandon, her second husband and a respected surgeon of the city, began examining his wife’s uncanny powers in the early 1920s, along with a tight group of individuals. As Margery became internationally recognized, this group expanded to include many more. Investigated by numerous professionals from across the globe throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Margery fostered as much wonder as she did controversy, drawing together psychical researchers intent on uncovering the mysteries of the otherworld. Members from the Society of Psychical Research (SPR) and other institutions in Britain were some of those who sought to examine her gifts. Eric J. Dingwall, the research officer of the SPR, went so far as to pursue Margery across the Atlantic Ocean to prompt a series of strange materializations. The American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR) similarly showed significant interest in Margery’s psychic capacities, and several of the society’s members across North America requested a sitting with her. They included physician T. Glen Hamilton and his wife, Lillian, of Winnipeg.

The Hamiltons conducted some of the most elaborate photographic experiments of paranormal phenomena in the world in the 1920s and 1930s, leading T. Glen Hamilton to make significant contributions to the *Proceedings* and the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* and to the *Quarterly Transactions of the British College of Psychic Science*, among other publications.<sup>4</sup> Joining the fray of internationally renowned psychical researchers, Hamilton allied himself with numerous



investigators in the United States and Britain. One of his most significant collaborations was with the Crandons of Boston. From the mid-1920s until the 1930s, the experiments of the Hamiltons and the Crandons intimately intertwined. In addition to correspondence, Hamilton and Crandon joined forces on several occasions and even shared the ghost of Margery's dead brother, Walter.

Walter revealed himself in surprising places, including at the New York spiritualist retreat of Lily Dale through a medium known as William Cartheuser. This unexpected connection drew the attention of ASPR psychical researchers, who attempted to test and experiment with Cartheuser. None of their investigations, however, were to be as detailed or long-standing as those done by author and musician Jenny O'Hara Pincock – a woman who regularly frequented Lily Dale and eventually convinced Cartheuser to return home with her to St. Catharines, Ontario. Although O'Hara Pincock remained very much on the edge of the scientific pursuit of the paranormal, unabashedly founding the Church of Divine Revelation and the Radiant Healing Centre in the 1930s, her testimony of Cartheuser's mediumship was internationally recognized as “authoritative” and even scientific in its approach.<sup>5</sup>

Drawing together sources from Canada, the United States, and Britain, this book brings to the fore significant qualities of paranormal research in the interwar era. In addition to a broad range of published materials from the period, resources gathered for this study include those from the archives of the British and American Societies for Psychical Research, as well as the Hamilton Family Fonds at the University of Manitoba and the Maines Pincock Family Fonds at the University of Waterloo. Notably, a substantial amount of the archival material addressed in this book emerges from these two Canadian collections. There are compelling reasons for this emphasis. Together, they form a coherent body of materials that has allowed me to identify a host of transnational exchanges between certain centres of paranormal investigation that may have been overlooked otherwise. All the while, these extraordinarily detailed records have provided a unique opportunity to tease out the complexities of the cultural and political work performed by individual psychical researchers and mediums. A deep analysis of these Canadian collections, situated in dialogue with American and British sources, uncovers important yet largely unexamined links between and across national boundaries.

Such a transnational scope is essential to fully understanding how psychical research took shape between the wars. Spiritualists and psychical researchers had communicated across national lines since the nineteenth

century.<sup>6</sup> By the 1920s and 1930s, however, the cross-border exchange of mediums, sitters, and researchers had intensified.<sup>7</sup> And they were by no means alone. With radically changing economies, politics, and demographics from 1900 to the 1930s, transnationalism characterized the period. Historian Stephen Kern has argued that the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed “a new sense of distance” whereby “lines of communication and transportation were extended over unprecedented distances, spreading out and at the same time bringing people into closer proximity than ever before.”<sup>8</sup> The First World War only encouraged these connections. From the 1920s onward, transnational organization and collaboration flourished between diverse groups of individuals who were intent on building a “global community,” to use the words of historian Akira Iriye.<sup>9</sup> Whether facilitated by religious or humanitarian groups, athletes or intelligentsia, an unprecedented cross-border cooperation marked “the emergence of international society.”<sup>10</sup>

In such a milieu, the continuous movement of mediums, sitters, and researchers across borders was far from unusual. Yet this trait has not always been closely analyzed in other studies of interwar spirit seeking. Jenny Hazelgrove, author of *Spiritualism and British Society between the Wars*, for instance, does in fact cite experiments that could be classified as transnational, such as those performed by American researcher Joseph B. Rhine with Irish medium Eileen Garret. Hazelgrove, however, does not highlight this feature of the experiments, maintaining her focus on British culture.<sup>11</sup> My study takes a different approach by probing how such links contributed to wider alliances as psychical researchers across the Atlantic Ocean attempted to construct a science around the paranormal.

These transnational ties were instrumental to how interwar psychical researchers represented themselves as credible scientific professionals, making it possible for them to argue for the empirical legitimacy of their findings across time and space. Arguably, such connections could also have certain disadvantages since reputations of collaborators could fall, as well as rise, in sync. This is important considering that the work of many psychical researchers was questioned and discredited before, during, and well after the interwar period.<sup>12</sup> Yet the network of investigators addressed in this study believed that such risks were necessary to further the science of the paranormal. Their conviction reflects how prominent transnational cooperation became in this era, shaping not only psychical research but also technological innovation, social movements, international diplomacy, economies, and more.<sup>13</sup>

Paranormal investigators strove to obtain the scientific label in a number of other ways as well. Undoubtedly, psychical researchers advocated some unconventional conceptions of scientific, psychological, and philosophical theories, as they seemed to take very literally William James's proposed "radical empiricism."<sup>14</sup> Yet rather than some peripheral pursuit, psychical research demonstrated a great deal about the relationship between the production of empirical knowledge and interwar culture. Historian Steven Shapin has suggested that as opposed to being formed in a vacuum, knowledge is produced by people "against the background of their culture's inherited knowledge, their collectively situated purposes."<sup>15</sup> The significant influence of science on modern society made the label of empiricism "an especially powerful incantation," as several historians have recognized.<sup>16</sup> As a result, a variety of seemingly disparate pursuits struggled to gain such status. Eventually, the label was attained by some, such as evolution and relativity, whereas others were not so successful, including phrenology, psychical research, and the investigation of unidentified flying objects. Rather than demarcating a clear distinction between science and nonscience, a comparison of the genesis of these endeavours reveals that the line between science and its more marginal incarnations is not fixed but is fluid and historically predicated.<sup>17</sup>

The pursuit of the paranormal in the interwar period illustrated this dynamic and often messy interplay between science and culture, empiricism and the esoteric. Spiritualists since the nineteenth century had been convinced that the living could communicate with the dead. Conceptions of life beyond the grave varied widely, but it was uniformly held that the otherworld was another plane of existence in which individual personalities continued to exist. People of this world could re-establish a connection with those who had died by joining hands in dark rooms and calling on the spirits to speak – a practice that came to be called a "seance."<sup>18</sup> Twentieth-century psychical researchers were equally enamoured with the intelligences of the seance room, but they insisted upon scrutinizing discarnate personalities by means of strict tests. Investigators argued that such examinations were necessary to determine whether these entities were the souls of those who had died. Describing themselves as agnostic on the question of the spirits' existence, psychical researchers claimed they were more rational and empirically driven than their spiritualist counterparts. In 1918 the president of the ASPR, James H. Hyslop, explained that spiritualists chose "to remain in the limbo of dark seances and indiscriminating performances, which carry no weight with any intelligent man."<sup>19</sup> He defined psychical researchers, in contrast, as those

who employed “the scientific method,” remaining skeptical of the spirits’ presence until proven, and who pursued the paranormal in the interests of “dignity, real science and intelligent treatment of facts.”<sup>20</sup>

Psychical researchers’ efforts to distinguish themselves from spiritualists did not convince everyone. *Toronto Star* correspondent Mark H. Halton, for instance, heralded the scientific study of the unseen as refreshingly empirical in comparison to the “many neurotics, ignoramuses and quacks calling themselves spiritualists.” Yet, even after questioning British psychical researcher Nandor Fodor, Halton insisted that the investigator “believe[s] you survive after death, and he does believe the dead can communicate with the living. So we’ll call him a spiritualist for short.”<sup>21</sup> Psychical researchers may have tried to define themselves as objective scientists, yet this did not stop others from interpreting their practices differently. The meaning of psychical research was not transparent and was construed in ways that investigators could not fully control. In this regard, psychical research resembled the natural sciences.

Scholar Mark Erikson describes science as “a complex, contested and contestable family-resemblance concept that holds a range of different meanings according to where it is being deployed and by whom.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike psychical research, the multiple understandings and discrepancies of science were carefully smoothed over not only by scientists but also by a society that invested deeply in the scientific project.<sup>23</sup> The characterization of psychical research as a failed science or pseudoscience often resulted in the showcasing of its weaknesses, biases, and inconsistencies.<sup>24</sup> Building off of philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour’s metaphor of science as a “very tight knot,” I suggest that paranormal investigation was a knot slightly unravelled. Its seams and fractures were therefore easier to discern than were those of the more established sciences.<sup>25</sup> Examining what was eventually perceived to be a failed science affords the opportunity to glimpse what empiricist endeavours look like when they are in the making and thus to discern the tenuous boundary between the scientific and the esoteric.

The ability of psychical research to showcase the inconsistencies of science became troublesome in the early twentieth century, which saw significant challenges to Newtonian causality, resulting in the “blurring of the distinctions between space, time and matter.”<sup>26</sup> Such contestations put the institution of science into an uncertain epistemological position, as the new theories called into question nineteenth-century ideas of the universe. After the First World War, this situation became more fraught when scientific institutions were associated with the weaponry

and technology that had wreaked unfathomable violence on the battlefields.<sup>27</sup> By analyzing the empirical rhetoric, practices, and technology of paranormal investigators, one can get a sense of the delicate cultural contours of scientific knowledge. In many regards, psychical research vividly reflected the role, influence, and popular understandings of science in the interwar period. More so, its historical formation highlights how specific conceptions of gender, class, and race animated the embodied prerequisites for making scientific claims in the first place.

#### SITUATING THE SEANCE: POWER, GENDER, AND TROUBLESOME BODIES

Despite psychical researchers' engagement with scientific knowledge and interwar culture, not to mention the broad popularity of paranormal topics in the 1920s and 1930s, their outlook was not exactly conventional.<sup>28</sup> The level of agency paranormal investigators ascribed to the metaphysical distinguished them from many others in their society, including the majority of natural scientists. Psychical researchers at times rejected, or at least remained skeptical of, the spiritualist assumption that these voices and touches in the seance were actually coming from otherworldly entities. "I am not talking about spirits or spirit manifestations," researcher J. Malcolm Bird explained regarding his approach to psychical investigation. "I am talking about psychic phenomena – phenomena which occur in such fashion as to be a function of the presence of some particular human personality, with its attendant organism, and without explanation in terms of known scientific doctrine."<sup>29</sup>

Regardless of their belief, or lack thereof, investigators and their fellow experimenters named, conversed with, and interacted with alleged discarnate personalities. As T. Glen Hamilton recognized, this approach, however odd at moments, seemed essential for the production of psychical phenomena.<sup>30</sup> Referring to them by name, obeying their specific instructions, and engaging with them verbally and sometimes physically, researchers credited these uncanny personalities with a sense of agency that was otherwise reserved for more materially inclined humans. This study takes such accounts seriously and treats these spirits as the dynamic agents they seemed to be in the seance room.

Those who participated in paranormal investigations approached the seance with several different and complex perspectives. Rather than placing these unsettling subjects within a decipherable box of irrationality

and dubiousness, this study aims to understand them in light of what cultural theorist Donna Haraway has referred to as “situated knowledges.”<sup>31</sup> As opposed to explaining away such mysterious happenings with an arsenal of deciphering techniques, I instead attempt to grapple with these accounts as significant cultural texts that, like many other transcriptions, contain ambiguities, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Instead of playing the role of rational observer over irrational subjects, I seek to unravel the concept of rationality itself in order to come to terms with the larger cultural significance of interwar psychical research in regard to science, technology, gender, class, race, and the body.

Although the focus is on self-proclaimed “scientific” investigators of the paranormal, I do not make a rigid distinction between “religious” and “secular” perspectives. Psychical research tended to call those categories into question, and the events in the seance room defied boundary-making processes. This study explores women investigators who fluidly moved between empirical ambitions and spiritual convictions. Male investigators, meanwhile, may have presented themselves and their colleagues as pursuing psychical research as an unemotional “cold science,” yet they by no means abandoned their religious affiliations. Moreover, heated disagreements over what constituted appropriate controls, or a credible manifestation, revealed that they were not as detached as they might claim.<sup>32</sup>

Rather than asserting some generalized notions of what it meant to be a psychical researcher, I employ a different tactic. As Latour recognizes, social scientists consistently endeavour to find coherence in groups, while too often ignoring their contradictions and volatility. He suggests an alternative, arguing that more “sturdy” and “revealing patterns” can be made evident by recognizing “the links between unstable and shifting frames of reference,” as opposed to constantly “trying to keep one frame stable.”<sup>33</sup> This practice does not diminish the existence of the group but rests more firmly upon the reiterations of the actors themselves, in contrast to some arbitrary ordering practice that a sociologist or a historian could impose. Applying such an analysis to the rhetoric, ideology, objects, and practice of those who explored psychical phenomena leads to a more involved understanding of what it meant to join hands in a seance circle. It also begins to pry open the very means by which groups and categories are constructed in the first place.<sup>34</sup>

One can readily identify group-making practices among psychical researchers, yet their ideas and practices remained diverse. As a result, this study does not attempt to construct a static and consistent social

group out of those who pursued the paranormal. Rather, it follows a set of actors who attempted to forge frameworks of methodology, technological apparatuses, and classifying techniques around and within the paranormal. What emerges is not a unified, impregnable movement but “a moving target” encircled by a vast array of intentions, materials, and performances.<sup>35</sup>

Despite making the actors of psychical research central to my analysis, the task of identifying and acknowledging agency in the seance is complex. This is especially the case when considering the presence of those who seemed to have agency but were not understood by all as *real* in the strict sense of the term – namely the discarnate personalities. Although often said to have bodily likenesses, including hands, heads, and torsos that materialized in the seance room, these intelligences were liminal and indeterminate. Meanwhile, mediums stripped of agency in rhetoric could, at times, wield it rather effectively in practice.

Women predominantly acted as mediums, but some men did as well. Whether working with men or women, however, psychical researchers ascribed stereotypical feminine qualities to each. Much as historian Alex Owen argues, qualities of passivity, compliance, and subjectivity were conceived of as necessary for credible spirit communication to occur and were closely equated with femininity.<sup>36</sup> Characterized by psychical investigators as lacking will, a medium’s body – not her mind – transformed into the chief instrument through which the spirits operated. Women mediums were therefore represented as the norm, whereas male mediums, however valued for their gifts, experienced great difficulty in evading classifications of sexual aberrance as they assumed the allegedly submissive role of communing with the spirits.

In such a context of the real and surreal, however, nothing was quite as it seemed. Competing agendas conflicted and personas transfigured as objects materialized, moved, and vanished. Likewise, mediums and their bodies took on identities and forms that were not static, resonating with the claim of theorist Michel Foucault that “the body is the surface of the inscription of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas).”<sup>37</sup> Rather than submissive blank slates upon which action was imposed, the bodies of mediums, like the ghosts they aroused, proved to be dynamic and sometimes inimical forces, at one moment passively playing the part assigned to them and, at another, subverting any known scripts of behaviour.

Much like scholar Saba Mahmood would caution, the actions of mediums cannot simply be understood in transparent terms of domination

and subordination.<sup>38</sup> The assumption that all mediums merely faked trances and phenomena to overthrow patriarchal authority is perhaps a bit too simplistic. Mediums, after all, often willingly cooperated with investigators, at least proposing that they did so for “the interests of truth, without thought of reward of any kind.”<sup>39</sup> Yet, even while freely operating within assumed frameworks of passivity and control, mediums and sometimes sitters defined their own sense of agency. Mediums of the interwar era gave over their bodies and minds for use in psychical experiments. Nevertheless, they did so to become a point of communion with another world that provided them a space in which to exercise power in ways that would have been impossible beyond the seance room walls.<sup>40</sup>

Mediums’ capacity for agency was frequently limited, however, and viewed as legitimate only if they were understood as under the control of spirits.<sup>41</sup> Only when their minds were entranced by other powers could they then become the submissive bodies necessary for the successful production of paranormal forces. Although psychical researchers tried to distance themselves from spiritualists, their experiments exacerbated the gender dynamics at work within the seance, strengthening the conviction that the medium needed to be absolutely passive.<sup>42</sup> Psychical researchers insisted upon some method of control, being suspicious of any medium who refused to undergo rigid tests.<sup>43</sup> Resistance suggested that the psychic had something to hide. Conscious defiance demonstrated coyness and deception.<sup>44</sup>

Psychical researchers were hardly alone in their convictions, as they buttressed masculine and feminine polarities much like the rest of the scientific establishment. Feminist scholars of technoscience have asserted that scientists insisted upon gendered spectrums of objectivity and subjectivity. The idea of science as a specifically masculine practice emerged from the context of seventeenth-century Europe, which witnessed the construction of “dichotomies between mind and nature, reason and feeling, masculine and feminine.”<sup>45</sup> Baconian philosophies of the scientific method were predicated upon the idea that nature needed to be dominated for the furtherance of human civilization. This notion was not necessarily a direct attack upon women, but it used the “well-worn Aristotelian categories” of hot and active masculinity in opposition to cold and passive femininity in order to propose “an active philosophy, one which would act as a formative principle upon a feminine nature.”<sup>46</sup> As a consequence of such sexual metaphors, women found themselves alienated from empirical practice, structured as passive and weak subjects, and suitable only for the investigative gaze of the male scientist.<sup>47</sup> Scientific



conceptions of feminine weakness and passivity in turn affected a multitude of professions that attempted to don the scientific garb, including medicine and the emerging study of the mind, which was later formalized into modern psychology.<sup>48</sup>

This idea of science was reaffirmed in the seance through a series of discursive and embodied performances. Although psychical researchers represented mediums as passive bodies through which paranormal forces could operate and be experimented with, they also constructed themselves, their methods, and their technologies in such a way as to parallel what they believed to be in line with the rational, scientific principles of their era. Faith in objective, scientific rationality did not die at the end of the nineteenth century. The years following the First World War, which saw for instance the establishment of the Vienna Circle, continued the nineteenth-century legacy whereby scientific knowledge was upheld as “the ultimate achievement of human rationality.”<sup>49</sup> Scientists in this equation became “transparent,” as Haraway has argued, presenting their ideas and methods as untainted by bodily subjectivity to offer “credibility to their descriptions of other bodies” while “minimiz[ing] critical attention to their own.”<sup>50</sup> Psychical researchers endeavoured to take on this distinctly gendered scientific mantle. Employing methods, technologies, and psychological theories to disembodied their perception of otherworldly realities, they rendered the mediums under scrutiny as subjective, effeminate, and irrational bodies.

Psychical researchers’ reference to the body at this time was not insignificant. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of several scientific programs that linked biological factors to the embodied formation of sex and gender. Scientists probed how hormones, glands, and molecular genetics influenced physiological characteristics, intent on discovering “sex itself.” Historian Sarah S. Richardson notes that during the interwar years “the scientific study of sex underwent rapid consolidation, professionalization and expansion.”<sup>51</sup> Yet these investigations were not divorced from their social context. As Angus McLaren describes, scientists frequently joined hands with a host of “eugenically inspired rationalists” who ultimately “sought the disciplining and regulation of the body.”<sup>52</sup> Fortifying specific notions of sexual difference, desirable reproductive traits, and distinctive gender roles, scientific discourse of the interwar era bolstered cultural norms by reinscribing opposing formations of masculine and feminine embodiment.<sup>53</sup>

The biological reinforcement of such gendered dichotomies may have been viewed as especially necessary after the First World War. In the 1920s

and 1930s, patriarchal structures were perceived as under threat – particularly with women’s recent enfranchisement, a growing female labour force, and the rise of the ubiquitous “modern girl.”<sup>54</sup> At the same time, an ideal of vigorous masculinity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seemed to be in peril in the aftermath of the war.<sup>55</sup> In 1914 men marched off to the frontlines, expecting to rejuvenate a militant masculinity that reflected qualities of physical prowess, strength, and courage.<sup>56</sup> The devastations of the war, however, challenged such ambitions and wreaked havoc on men’s bodies, as well as their minds. The degree to which the war changed both gender and society more broadly has been debated by historians, as the postwar era arguably witnessed a reassertion of so-called traditional gender roles rather than a reassessment of them. The fears the war experience induced about masculinity and femininity were nevertheless widespread and compelled individuals to respond accordingly.<sup>57</sup>

In a world in which gender seemed to be in the midst of a dangerous flux, psychical researchers reaffirmed notions of passive and weak womanhood through scientific control. Investigators, who were primarily middle- to upper-class, professional men, rigorously managed female bodies, insisting that such control was necessary to establish the scientific credibility of psychical experiments.<sup>58</sup> Conceptions of not only gender but also how gender itself was embodied therefore acted as a powerful organizing principle of interwar paranormal investigations, situating mediums as under the legitimate control of psychical researchers. Male mediums, who potentially threatened the dichotomy of manly authority over womanly mediums, were neutralized by investigators through their biological classification as inherently effeminate.

This power dynamic also manifested itself in other ways as psychical researchers and spiritualists came in contact with worldly and otherworldly figures that fell beneath categories of not only gender but also class and race. Gendered categories of passive feminine embodiment and masculine dominance thus operated within broadly conceived hierarchies of class and race in the seance, highlighting those who were intended to wield authority and those who were not.

The period under investigation fell at the tail end of what some historians have dubbed the “Great Transformation,” due to considerable industrial, capital, and urban growth.<sup>59</sup> It was a period of significant working-class labour movements, which especially made their mark on cities where a popular enthusiasm toward the paranormal flourished. Mediums were typically members of the labouring classes themselves,

but even when they were not, the spectre of the lower classes remained in various subtle and not so subtle ways. Due to their more fragile economic status, psychics commonly engaged in spirit communication for the purpose of making an income. As they were labourers of a unique sort, their success relied on their ability to be not only convincing but entertaining as well.<sup>60</sup> These two aims went hand in hand, many skeptics remarked, as the more distracted sitters were by floating objects, ghostly voices, touches, or lively spirit guides, the less likely they were to notice any deception on the part of the medium.<sup>61</sup>

As often as psychics were cast as conniving, they were simultaneously fetishized as well, quite possibly to defuse the social challenges that the labour unrest of this era fostered. A pacified, compliant, and feminine version of the working class might have been much more comforting to middle-class sitters than were the riotous union members of their cities. Psychological researchers were by and large from the middle to upper echelons of society, and they compiled the extensive records and photographs of paranormal experiments that now rest in a select number of archives. This study is indebted to such records, yet they too need to be historicized and put into context. These meticulously collected documents emerged from a specific socio-economic perspective and, as a result, expressed a conscious desire to rebrand the pursuit of the paranormal as a more respectable middle- to upper-class enterprise.<sup>62</sup> The constant employment of scientific language, methods, and practice arguably provided such respectability. Moreover, it legitimized investigators' power over others who seemed beyond such control in the world outside the seance room's walls.

Scientific control justified the regulation of gendered, classed, and finally racialized bodies. At least in terms of the network of psychological researchers and mediums that this study addresses, the sitters and even mediums were white. Yet despite such homogeneity, racialized spirits played significant roles in contacting the dead. These spirits needed to be properly controlled and managed according to the expectations of white seance participants. Such management affirmed white privilege and power, with the racialization of the spirits acting as a foil to the supposedly race-neutral, white sitters.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, orientalised ghosts created the necessary conditions for seance participants to rediscover an individualistic metaphysics, while infusing their scientific endeavours with perceptible, and thus empirically measurable, instances of ghostly encounters.

Operating within a number of gender, class, and racial frameworks of power, the seance seemed to be anything but a closed space. Sitters,

investigators, mediums, and even spirits hearkened to social structures well beyond the walls of their experimental rooms. Far from a vacuum where individuals pursued eccentric goals irrelevant to the world around them, the seance remained imbued, even haunted, by interwar tensions, anxieties, and ambiguities as investigators endeavoured to fashion a scientific enterprise. The unique space of the seance, however, was more than simply a pale reflection of the interwar world. The struggle for authority between investigator, psychic, and spirit laid bare the deeply political relationship between gender, empiricism, and technology, while also providing the opportunity for embodied reconfigurations.

#### SENSATIONAL APPARITIONS: METHOD, THEORY, AND ORGANIZATION

By closely examining the scientific identity psychical researchers attempted to adopt for themselves, the mediumistic and ghostly subjects they studied, their records, methods, and technology, and the psychological and scientific classification they employed, this study aims to construct what scholar Steven Connor refers to as a “cultural phenomenology” of these seances. In contrast to Connor, however, I argue that such a perspective does not diminish the gender, class, and race politics of the seance. Rather it is my contention that a meticulous reading brings these struggles to the fore with even greater clarity.<sup>64</sup>

That said, I do not exhaustively illuminate every psychical researcher, medium, or series of experiments conducted at this time, and in certain instances I refer to some rather high-profile cases only in passing or from an atypical perspective. Of all these incidents, the experiments with Mina Crandon, or “Margery,” stand as the most famous. Her mediumship became widely known in North America and Europe throughout the 1920s and 1930s, forging how many regarded the paranormal, to the delight of some and the deep chagrin of others.<sup>65</sup> As a result, her mediumship has attracted the attention of a number of scholars. For the most part, however, these narratives have focused almost exclusively on her critics, who deemed Crandon a fraud.<sup>66</sup> Some of these studies, for instance, have examined the damning investigations conducted by famous escape artist Harry Houdini during his notorious involvement with the case.<sup>67</sup> By comparison, very little attention has been paid to Crandon’s perspective. As a result, the cynical attitudes of some of her investigators have been largely affirmed rather than analyzed.

By scrutinizing numerous reports, letters, graphs, photographs, publications, and objects produced by psychical researchers, this work aims to reveal the dynamics of seances themselves. Mediums in these contexts were largely silenced throughout experimental records, their stories, attitudes, and experiences being filtered by their examiners. Yet through a more intimate reading of these sources, one can gain a few passing glimpses of individual psychics and their responses to the prods, gropes, and scrutiny of their investigators. Much like several scholars of colonialism, I seek to grasp not only what was recorded but also what was omitted. By identifying absences, gaps, and “unintelligibilities,” I aim to detect the subtle, muted voices of those who rested at the centre of these investigations but often had limited power over them.<sup>68</sup>

Pivotal to my reading of these sources is a close examination of physical perception and the embodiment to which it hearkened. Whereas the politics of gender has been closely analyzed in the literature of spiritualism, the role of bodies has received much less attention – a gap that this study endeavours to address. The history of the body stresses that the body is a product of history and is thus not invariable but “always becoming,” as historian Lisa Helps describes.<sup>69</sup> The body can therefore not be separated from the world out of which it emerges. It is, as historians Steven Shapin and Christopher Lawrence describe, “culturally embedded and culture-constituting.”<sup>70</sup> This conception of the body is indebted to Michel Foucault, who claims that the body is assembled by systems of power that endeavour to structure and manage it.<sup>71</sup> Theorist Judith Butler counters this position, arguing that despite such regulation, the unstable body evades or exceeds categorical discipline, calling into question the “hegemonic force” of sexual and medical norms.<sup>72</sup> Yet an analysis of how the body is culturally and historically situated in no way precludes its physicality, as historian James Opp insists, but rather illustrates “that human experience is mediated prereflexively through the material body.”<sup>73</sup> Taken together, the analyses of these scholars suggest that the materiality of the body is an unpredictable product of history and culture. If the body is formed in this way, so too must be its perceptions.

The history of the senses cannot be attributed entirely to interest in the history of the body. This seems especially to be the case in that calls for a history of the senses predate the history of the body, beginning with historian Lucien Febvre in 1941.<sup>74</sup> The history of the body and the history of the senses, however, have not developed in isolation from one another.<sup>75</sup> As anthropologist David Howes and historian Mark Smith have insisted, the perceptions, much like the body, are not universal but need to be

historically situated.<sup>76</sup> I therefore consider the body alongside the senses to discern how psychical researchers ordered their own bodies and others in relation to their physical perceptions of the paranormal.<sup>77</sup> The result is an intersensorial analysis that considers how the supernatural materialized in the seance room in relation to material and spiritual bodies.

The following chapters offer a detailed analysis of the ways that psychical researchers constructed a science of the paranormal, examining interwar entanglements between this world and the next through investigators' rhetoric, technology, and practice. Psychical researchers attempted to manage their psychical laboratories according to rigorous standards, honing their methods and technologies to objectively perceive the otherworld. However, their subjects proved difficult to control. Researchers contended that mediums were the perfect bodily machines for producing paranormal effects. As a consequence, these unusually gifted individuals rested at the crux of psychical experiments, virtually dictating when investigations would succeed or fail. Together, investigator, medium, and spirit adopted, engaged with, and remade the gendered meanings ascribed to empiricism and technology through embodied performances that could at once affirm and transgress normative cultural mores of the interwar world.