

Embodying Essence: Corporeality, Dualism and Rhetorical Invention in the Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century Female Spirit Mediums

Elizabeth Lowry

Arizona State University
E-mail: elowry1@asu.edu

Abstract

A close reading of nineteenth-century female spirit mediums' autobiographies reveals how these women gained access to the public sphere. Drawing on Elizabeth Grosz's feminist reading of Descartes' theory of dualism, this article analyzes differing implications of rhetorical strategies used in women's spiritual memoirs. Furthermore, this study considers how the female autobiographer represents her own physicality. The personal narratives examined here suggest that a Victorian-era woman's awareness of her own gendered body is central to contextualizing how feminine corporeality was constructed and the ways in which it continues to complicate issues of female empowerment.

Keywords: *autobiography, women, nineteenth-century, dualism, body*

Introduction

This article explores the concept of corporeality within the context of nineteenth-century Spiritualist mediumship—that is, the phenomena of a (usually female) spiritual authority appearing before an audience in order to deliver messages that were believed to have originated from spirit-beings. Historically, mediumship played a powerful role in women's first public appearances: since women were discouraged from speaking in public and their opinions were often dismissed, the first female spiritual leaders appeared as “trance-speakers” who ostensibly channeled spirit guides.¹ According to historian Ann Braude, men “addressed their own views on Spiritualist subjects. In contrast, the women at the podium were unconscious.”² The fact that the woman at the podium was believed to be speaking on behalf of an otherworldly entity made it acceptable for her to appear before an audience, express ideas, and deliver lectures.³ In

¹ John Kucich, “Ghostly Communion: Spiritualism, Reform and Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” in *The Occult in Nineteenth-Century America*, Ed. Cathy Gutierrez. (Aurora, CO: Davies Group Publishing, 2005), 41.

² Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 85.

³ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 201.

other words, given that Victorian-era women were so often prohibited from performing, they developed complex rhetorical strategies in order to gain access to the public sphere. These strategies included displays of humility and an emphasis on passivity and physical debility. Furthermore, cultural discourses of feminine vulnerability helped women gain credibility as spiritual leaders.

Drawing on Elizabeth Grosz's feminist readings of Descartes, I examine the role that Cartesian dualism plays in shaping cultural perceptions of the female body and its entry into the public sphere. Grosz defines Cartesian dualism as "the assumption that there are two distinct mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, mind and body, each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere. Taken together, the two have incompatible characteristics."⁴ When the body is viewed as a kind of biological "machine" controlled by the mind, the mind is coded as being superior to the body. This is problematic, Grosz says, because historically women have been constructed as "*more* biological, *more* corporeal, *more* natural than men."⁵ With this in mind, I consider how dualism informs nineteenth-century discourses of sexual vulnerability as well as feminine corporeality.

According to Alison Piepmeier, "Print culture is...a key site to examine in terms of women's embodiment in general."⁶ While scholars of Spiritualism such as Alex Owen refer to numerous third person accounts detailing the lived experiences of nineteenth-century spirit mediums, none have yet attended directly to first person autobiographical accounts that reveal the complexities of the mediums' self-representation, particularly with respect to corporeality. To do so, as I will argue, is important because it adds to existing scholarship on the intersection between femininity and the construction of subjectivity. According to feminist historiographers such as Alison Piepmeier and Rita Felski, scholars today have a tendency to make generalizations about Victorian-era women and to assume mistakenly that they were mostly alike in terms of their responses to social prohibitions.⁷ To answer Felski and Piepmeier's call for attention to nuance and difference in this area, I propose to analyze varying concepts of corporeality in the autobiographies of three American nineteenth-century female spirit mediums.

The autobiographies considered in this study are Amanda Theodosia Jones's *Psychic Autobiography* (1910); Leah Fox Underhill's *Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism* (1885); and Nettie Colburn Maynard's *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist?* (1897). Amanda Jones was a scientist living in upstate New York, known (among other things) for inventing a method of packing and preserving fruit. Jones also ran a canning factory in the Midwest and was involved in various organizations that provided support for working-class women. Leah Fox Underhill is the eldest of the three Fox sisters who—in 1848—were credited with starting what is now known as the

⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 6.

⁵ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 14.

⁶ Alison Piepmeier, *Out in Public: Configurations of Women's Bodies in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 185.

⁷ Piepmeier, *Out in Public*, 7. See also Rita Felski, *Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 7-9.

modern Spiritualist movement.⁸ Underhill's autobiography details the early years of Spiritualism during which she and her sisters traveled throughout the mid-Atlantic states giving demonstrations. Through a system of raps and knocks, the three young women showed audiences how they communicated with spirits. Lastly, Nettie Colburn Maynard claimed to have been one of several psychic practitioners who advised Lincoln on military strategy during the Civil War. These mediums made no reference to one another in their work and there is no evidence that they knew one another, however, their autobiographies were published within a twenty-five year period, and, by the late nineteenth-century, they were all practicing primarily within the Northeast.

Notably, Underhill was a "physical" medium, while Jones and Maynard were "mental" mediums. Alan Kardec, an affiliate of the early Society for Psychical Research, details the fundamental difference between physical and mental mediumship: Physical mediumship means demonstrating spirit influences materially; for instance, physical mediums are purportedly able to move furniture and to summon noises (or "rappings") from tables, floors, or walls to spell out messages.⁹ In contrast, while mental mediums may enter a trance state, they create no physical phenomena in their immediate environment.¹⁰ They may speak via a spirit "control" or may simply relay messages from the afterworld to séance sitters. Underhill apparently helped people to communicate with spirits via "rappings" as a form of code—which she referred to as a "celestial telegraph." Jones and Maynard describe going into trance states and absorbing other identities—or foreign entities—in order to relay messages. However, only Maynard reports losing consciousness while in a trance state. The rhetorical implications of this—along with the notion of performing presence and absence—are examined later in this piece.

Autobiography and Reading for Difference

In the nineteenth-century, theories of mind-body dualism, particularly those advanced by Descartes, informed western thought—and the idea of a mind-body split was considered to be an objective scientific truth.¹¹ In her book, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century*, Marina Warner asserts that in twentieth century scholarship "mind-body dualism has been discounted ...but it is still difficult to turn one's back on...the principle of animation: the difference between life and death depends on an animus or anima imagined to lurk within an embodied personality."¹² This view, Grosz says, is problematic for feminism because women were constructed as being biologically inferior to men, thus reinscribing a belief that patriarchal subjugation is justifiable.¹³

⁸ Ernest Isaacs, "The Fox Sisters and American Spiritualism," in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, eds. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 80. Here, Isaacs outlines how modern American Spiritualism came to be known as such.

⁹ Allan Kardec, *The Mediums' Book*. (London: Psychic Press, 1971), 172-73.

¹⁰ Kardec, *The Mediums' Book*, 177-183.

¹¹ Grosz, *Volatile*, 6.

¹² Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media in the Twenty-first Century*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 9.

¹³ Grosz, *Volatile*, 14.

In the mid nineteenth-century, emerging research in human biology and the social sciences fostered a belief that women were inherently weak and simple-minded. This belief about the nineteenth-century woman reflected “the need to preserve her energies for reproduction; she suffered a foreshortened maturation, but the race gained...”¹⁴ Women’s fragile bodies were believed to be evidence of equally fragile minds.¹⁵ Women were viewed in terms of their bodies, which were likened to conduits or instruments.¹⁶ The fact that women were believed to be “*more corporeal...than men*” meant that their subjectivity (typically associated with the mind) often went unacknowledged.¹⁷ Moreover, the construction of women as empty vessels also revealed common nineteenth-century assumptions about the relationship between mind and body; namely that the mind-body split theorized by Descartes during the Enlightenment era was considered to be an objective scientific truth.¹⁸ The notion of a mind-body split supported the belief that women were biologically predisposed toward mediumship. Naturally passive and weak-willed, women could easily absorb the consciousness of another being. Because of their sensitivity, women could internalize masculine minds and surrender their agency to facilitate “self-to-self communication.”¹⁹ However, although the female medium was believed to be naturally possessed of an ability to absorb and transmit external forces, she still inhabited a female body, which meant material constraints, prohibitions and vulnerabilities.

For instance, prior to her stint at the White House, Nettie Colburn Maynard mentions going on a trance-speaking circuit with a friend named Parnie. While with Parnie, Maynard describes a night at a boarding house when the two of them narrowly escape an attack from the proprietor, who calls Parnie his “princess,” and attempts to break down the women’s bedroom door. The two terrified young women resolve to escape from the boarding house: “Our hearts were beating wildly, and my friend was already on the window-sill ready for a spring, and I on the chair beside her to follow.”²⁰ Experiences such as this were apparently not unusual for women who appeared in public. Indeed, the specter of sexual assault is also familiar to Leah Fox Underhill.

While on display, Underhill is constantly reminded by her audience—and consequently reminds her readers—that the female body is under perpetual threat and in tension with surrounding environments. For example, when staying at a hotel in Manhattan, the Fox sisters find that they must frequently contend with unwanted advances. Underhill writes: “I complained that that man had dared to come to my door, within my private hours, without first sending up his card for permission; that he had insulted me, and...I begged he might never be admitted again under any circumstances.”²¹ Later, Underhill complains of the lewdness she and her young sisters must tolerate. Often, she and her sisters appear before drunken men who frighten them

¹⁴ Cynthia Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991. AZW file) 11, 54.

¹⁵ Russett, *Sexual Science*, 24, 42, 54.

¹⁶ Jill Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859–1919* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 135.

¹⁷ Grosz, *Volatile*, 14.

¹⁸ Grosz, *Volatile*, 6.

¹⁹ Galvan, *Sympathetic*, 16.

²⁰ Nettie Colburn Maynard, *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist? Or Curious Revelations from the Life of a Trance Medium*. (Philadelphia: Rufus C. Hartranft, 1891), 32.

²¹ Leah Fox Underhill, *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism*. (New York: Thomas Knox & Co, 1885), 167.

by making vulgar remarks. When Underhill describes some of these venues and their predominantly male audiences, she mentions feeling afraid—but mostly she is offended, implying that much of her fear and indignation relates to the threat of sexual assault. Here, Underhill presents part of a letter from her sister Katie, who is distressed by groups of unruly men at her demonstrations: “All but two, were drunk as they could well be. They made mean low remarks. Only imagine Maggie and me, and dear mother, before a crowd of drunken Senators!”²² Furthermore, Underhill suggests that for the Fox sisters even the domestic sphere is unsafe—the girls always seem to be fending off male intruders. The theme of the invasion of feminine spaces is a recurrent one in Underhill’s autobiography: “I scratched a match and had just time to see the form of a man who had got the lower sash raised and half his body into the room.”²³ In addition to contending with the unwanted attention of men, the sisters are subject to numerous “tests” administered by skeptics, many of which involve physical constraint. Underhill details the ways in which her body and those of the younger two Fox sisters were under constant scrutiny. Their feet were held down when it was suspected the rapping noises heard by audience members were not the telegraph-like communiqués of spirits, but the girls cracking their toe joints. Underhill also recounts an occasion on which she and her sisters were forced to strip before a “Committee” of ladies to prove they were not hiding any gadgets that could account for the ghostly raps and knocks made during demonstrations.²⁴ In these nineteenth-century public spheres, the female body was under surveillance, at risk, and restricted.

In her work on nineteenth-century corporeality and public engagement, Piepmeier asserts: “nineteenth-century women’s engagement with the public world can become invisible to scholars when that engagement is embedded in the context of a society that values women’s situatedness in the home and of a scholarship that views women as victims.”²⁵ In Piepmeier’s view, it is unproductive to determine whether or not these women can be defined as victims or agents—the point is to consider how agency or “acts of agency and resistance...emerge within a social, cultural and perhaps a personal context of disempowerment.”²⁶ As such, Maynard and Underhill’s experiences illustrate the cultural tensions surrounding the social performance of the female agent within nineteenth-century contexts. However, it is also worth remembering that—when writing about their lives—nineteenth-century women often used the trope of vulnerability and weakness as a rhetorical strategy to remind their readers of their femininity and to make their presence in the public sphere more acceptable. For instance, when Jones writes about her career as a medium, she claims: “Great pressures have been brought to bear upon me, as will in part, appear; burdens have been imposed such as no mortal could sustain”²⁷ In constructing herself as a fragile, vulnerable creature, Jones builds her feminine ethos, wanting to be seen as a woman who sacrifices her well-being for the public good.

Piepmeier points to another issue that emerges when contemporary scholars attempt to understand the material constraints of nineteenth-century gender roles—

²² Underhill, *The Missing Link*, 270.

²³ Underhill, *The Missing Link*, 219.

²⁴ Underhill, *The Missing Link*, 68.

²⁵ Piepmeier, *Out in Public*, 7.

²⁶ Piepmeier, *Out in Public*, 9.

²⁷ Amanda T. Jones, *A Psychic Autobiography*. Greaves Publishing Co: New York. 1910. (1st Ed.) (New York: Arno Press, 1980) 69.

particularly assumptions made about female Victorian-era writers. When considering Sarah Hale, the editor of the *Ladies Home Journal*, Piepmeier discusses the assumption that “the world of print could offer a woman writer a...protected space where her actual physicality was masked; her readers encountered her words and her constructed world rather than her physical body. The implication of these assertions is that the female body is somehow entrapping and print allows women to escape from their embodiment...”²⁸ In response to assertions that print could offer a “protected space” to female writers, Piepmeier writes: “While current feminist critics posit print as a freeing site, a number of nineteenth-century authors describe print culture as oppressively embodied.”²⁹ In my own work on female mediums’ autobiographies, the idea of the oppressive embodiment of print culture is evident in the introduction to each book which contains an endorsement written by a man assuring prospective readers that the work in question should not be dismissed. For instance, the editor’s preface to Maynard’s autobiography refers to her as “a thorough Christian woman of irreproachable character and antecedents”³⁰ and the publisher’s introduction to Jones’s work reads: “Miss Jones is a well-known poetess in this country...She has also been a successful mentor and practical business woman. These accomplishments have made her well enough known to make attention to her psychic experiences desirable.”³¹ By focusing on character and characteristics such as practicality and mentorship, these men hope to establish enough credibility for the female writer to attract a wide readership. But often these endorsements were insufficient. The Victorian-era woman was also obliged to remind her readers that she knew her place, and that she only saw fit to write an autobiography because she felt that accounts of her own spiritual experience might be of help and comfort to others. Maynard claims: “by the aid of this precious gift I have brought comfort to the bedside of the dying and more than once have staid the suicidal hand”³² Each ensuing chapter, then, is committed to a ritual justification for appearing in public, which in the case of Underhill and Maynard meant providing more letters of endorsement from various society women or better yet—a gentleman.

Physical Debility and Spirituality

When late nineteenth-century female mediums write about themselves, they begin by engaging similar rhetorical tropes. Each of the mediums in this study expresses reluctance at entering the public sphere to demonstrate her abilities, claiming that she does so only in the service of a higher cause. This particular trope is typical of nineteenth-century social mores which decreed that a woman should remain in the domestic sphere.³³ A violation of this etiquette required an apology and an explanation of why such a transgression was necessary. For instance, Maynard and Underhill both claim to have written their autobiographies due to pressure from friends and colleagues in the Spiritualist community.³⁴ Further, the female medium typically casts herself as

²⁸ Jones, *Psychic*, 175.

²⁹ Jones, *Psychic*, 185.

³⁰ Maynard, *Was Abraham Lincoln*, xiii.

³¹ Jones, *Psychic*, 5.

³² Maynard, *Was Abraham Lincoln*, 5.

³³ Russett, *Sexual Science*, 18.

³⁴ Maynard, *Was Abraham Lincoln*, 1. Also see Underhill, *Missing Link*, 1.

being physically weak and prone to illness. Of the mediums I discuss in this study, Jones and Maynard—the “mental” mediums—both mention serious childhood illnesses, while Underhill—the “physical” medium—claims to have always enjoyed good health. These claims—both to health and illness—bear particular relevance when examining the nature of Spiritualist practice itself and also speak to nineteenth-century concepts of the mind-body split, the implications of which manifest in how illness becomes a way to transcend the problem of the female body.

Leigh Gilmore’s *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation*, addresses the autobiographies of female mystics such as Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila, claiming that their “life-changing spiritual experiences began as illnesses, that is, as disturbances in the body. Each produced a discourse evolving from the body in pain.”³⁵ Typically, a female spiritual leader suffers a transformative pain that increases her awareness of the spirit world. Catherine Albanese writes, “in some traditional societies, mediumship could be preceded by an inaugural illness, a journey into altered consciousness that functioned as a . . . rite of initiation into the world of sacrifice and suffering that attendance on the spirits demanded.”³⁶ Maynard and Jones describe such inaugural illnesses, but after having done so, their autobiographies seem to dispense with the body completely. Maynard refers to her body only as her “organism”³⁷ while Jones refers to hers in the third person, as “the body.”³⁸ Corporeality is mentioned as little as possible and these mediums discuss their abilities from a purely spiritual point of view, focusing on the trance aspect of their experiences.

Chronicling the experiences of mental mediums, Jones and Maynard’s autobiographies do reflect a strong split—and in some cases a striking disconnect—between mind and body. Jones, particularly preoccupied by this concept, attempts to explicate her beliefs: “Always a body, tangible to itself, however near to imponderability; always a spirit—finite particle of the Infinite, always an objective consciousness mediating between the two; always an indomitable entity, more and more closely approximating to the Divine Essence, but never to be absorbed therein!”³⁹ Here it is suggested that as a “particle of the infinite” the mind is an entity that is capable of spiritual growth, although there is a limit to how much it can grow while it is tethered to the body.

The concept of a separation between mind and body is of rhetorical significance when considering the purpose of women’s spiritual writings. Historical precedent dictates that the spiritually motivated autobiography must focus on the intellect and conscience rather than on the body. Gilmore asserts that—generally speaking—the “self” that Victorian-era women construct in their autobiographies seems to exclude physicality altogether. “The mind/body split is reproduced through the public/private, outside/inside, male/female categories that order perception and experience and is derived from a way of knowing which cannot account for the knowledge of the body.”⁴⁰ Hence, the autobiography is typically intended to privilege the life of the mind and the

³⁵ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 134.

³⁶ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007) 236.

³⁷ Maynard, *Was Abraham Lincoln*, 61, 135.

³⁸ Jones, *Psychic*, 25, 46, 71.

³⁹ Jones, *Psychic*, 33.

⁴⁰ Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 84.

spirit—the “higher” qualities of humanity. The body is not considered to be a legitimate way of knowing. Further, Gilmore posits, “Indeed, until feminist criticism, predominant ways of knowing defined the body’s knowledge as that which is unknowable. The self has functioned as a metaphor for soul, consciousness, intellect and imagination, but never for body.”⁴¹ Ignoring or avoiding discussion of the body bears strong political implications—that is, before “feminist criticism” the “body’s knowledge” was likely considered to be feminine and therefore inferior. For the female medium to be taken seriously, the body was to be left behind because it undermined her credibility, but ironically, it was also this passive body that made her susceptible to spirit communication.

Unlike Jones and Maynard, Underhill is apparently unable to disengage from her own physicality. Rather than “leaving” her body in order to experience spirit visitations as evidence of mind-body duality, Underhill’s experiences with spirits suggest an increased bodily presence in that her exchanges with these otherworldly beings are intensely tactile. Underhill describes her spirit visitors as entities who are capable of moving objects, banging on furniture, and slapping or pinching the three Fox girls.⁴² Underhill also refers to “violent and protracted knockings” at many of the places she inhabits. “Now what sort of Spirits were they who thus disturbed our nights? And why?”⁴³ Given that the Fox sisters’ experiences with spirits are so stressful, Underhill mentions feeling worn out when pushed to perform: “We could not explain to their satisfaction that we were exhausted under the constant pressure of mind and body”⁴⁴ Wryly, Underhill concludes: “If the Rochester knockings were an imposture, nobody was more imposed upon by them than myself.”⁴⁵

Trance and Passivity

In her autobiography, Nettie Colburn Maynard describes entering trances so heavy that they render her unconscious. In this respect, Maynard—who often works with Washington DC’s social elite—demonstrates a keen awareness of the rhetorical situation: “the female medium’s inattentiveness...implied her ignorance of the often personal and confidential facts she communicated from the departed, it also implied the authenticity of the communications themselves.”⁴⁶ The “authenticity of these communications is further verified by Maynard’s apparent disconnection from her physical surroundings. While trances are perceived as disconcerting, they are not usually reported as unpleasant. Maynard describes feelings of deep relaxation prior to entering a trance state.”⁴⁷ Jones’s trance experiences are similarly positive. Because she believes herself to be communicating with heavenly beings, Jones speaks of feeling energized and empowered whenever she communicates with the departed. Furthermore, the spirits, particularly those that Jones refers to as Dr. Hudson and Dr. Andrews,

⁴¹ Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 84.

⁴² Underhill, *Missing Link*, 40.

⁴³ Underhill, *Missing Link*, 439.

⁴⁴ Underhill, *Missing Link*, 53.

⁴⁵ Underhill, *Missing Link*, 167.

⁴⁶ Galvan, *Sympathetic*, 13.

⁴⁷ Maynard, *Was Abraham Lincoln*, 67.

provide Jones with instruction and are cited as the inspiration for her inventions. According to Denise Pilato, it was not unusual for female inventors of that era to attribute their contributions to a male spirit control.⁴⁸ This was a rhetorical strategy that presumably would make their ventures into the scientific community more acceptable to the nineteenth-century establishment. The female inventor, therefore, could be construed as a man's inventive and rational mind temporarily inhabiting a female body. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Jones so clearly privileges mind over matter.

Jones's views on the mind and body are considerably more complex than those of the other two mediums discussed in this study. She speaks frequently of the "ethereal body" as being the authentic human form (the physical self being of lesser importance), and also refers to the spirit as "the essential self."⁴⁹ She expresses skepticism with regard to mediums who apparently lose consciousness when they enter a trance state, which she calls "deceptive sleep."⁵⁰ Jones claims that in contrast, when she experiences a trance, she collaborates with the spirits, but they do not invade her body; she remains fully present to herself. However, upon describing an encounter with a spirit Jones writes: "I seemed to rise heavenward in a confusing light...and I sank back to the body if indeed I had been absent. I can remember no other moment of my life when my mind was so emptied of all thought and so filled with all content."⁵¹ Here, Jones actually does seem to be leaving her body, yet nobody inhabits the body she leaves behind. She sinks back into it, having received new wisdom. Since Jones describes the mind as being "filled", her description evokes two vessels—the body and the mind—whereas Maynard's description refers to just one—the body. Typically, trance mediums did not describe their minds as being "filled with all content," simply that their bodies had been taken over by an "other" consciousness. Nonetheless, both Jones and Maynard's accounts of mental mediumship set up a heavily marked boundary between concepts of the internal and external.

Jones and Maynard's explicit adherence to the notion of a mind and body split is significant because the nineteenth-century was a time when Descartes' legacy of mind-body dualism was beginning to be challenged and the relationship between mind and body had come to be hotly debated. Maynard and Underhill apparently drew from popular wisdom, which had no doubt been shaped by a longstanding Cartesian legacy. Jones, however, was educated as a scientist and appears to consider the implications of this split more fully. Much convoluted writing on the subject in her autobiography suggests that in some way she knew the issue was contested, but was attempting to privilege her own ways of knowing. As such, Jones speaks not only of a separation between mind and body, but of a separation of mind from mind. She quotes her spirit guide, Dr. Hudson: "Man has two minds, the objective and the subjective...each of these two minds is capable of independent action and they are also capable of synchronous action. But, in the main, they possess independent powers and perform independent functions."⁵² The concept of "two minds" could explain why Jones is capable of going into trance states while remaining conscious—both her objective and subjective minds are at work simultaneously. But the reader is left to wonder which mind she refers to

⁴⁸ Denise Pilato, *Retrieval of a Legacy: Nineteenth-century American Women Inventors*. (Westport Connecticut; and London: Praeger Publishing, 2000), 18-19.

⁴⁹ Jones, *Psychic*, 29, 30, 36.

⁵⁰ Jones, *Psychic*, 145-46.

⁵¹ Jones, *Psychic*, 29.

⁵² Jones, *Psychic*, 22.

when she writes only a few pages later: “I can remember no other moment of my life when my mind was so emptied of all thought and so filled with all content.”⁵³ Jones’s discourse supports the idea of the body simply being a container for the mind and of a clear distinction between form and content, but there is also a mind that apparently contains “spirit” content and another that does not. Although we have two minds, according to Jones these two minds are not as disconnected from one another as both are from the body—in fact, there is much mediation between the two: the spirit mind informs the human mind.

Claiming Agency

Unlike Jones and Maynard’s autobiographies, Underhill’s autobiography does not emphasize weakness or illness. Underhill does, however, capitalize on female vulnerability to draw sympathy, but deploys different rhetorical tactics. While Jones and Maynard emphasize their fragility and weakness in order to make themselves appear more feminine, Underhill refuses to portray herself as weak, instead projecting a robust, healthy, and self-sufficient femininity.⁵⁴ Thus, Underhill attempts to appeal to readers by suggesting that because she is robust and healthy, she is able to defend herself against unwanted male advances. Had Underhill been physically or emotionally weaker, she or her sisters may have been “ruined.”

In choosing to violate social ideals of femininity by emphasizing health over sickness, strength over weakness, and presence over absence, Underhill’s autobiography implies—particularly through her critique of how men react to her in public—that social attitudes toward the female body need to change. In contemporary terms, she might be classified as what Elizabeth Grosz describes as a “social constructionist” feminist, that is, one who holds: “the belief that it is not biology *per se* but the ways in which the social system organizes and gives meaning to biology that is oppressive to women. The distinction between the ‘real’ biological body and the body as object of representation is a fundamental presumption.”⁵⁵ The view that the female body is not in and of itself an obstacle or an inherent “problem” may have been considered radical during the nineteenth-century, but Grosz believes that such a view is inadequate for postmodern feminism because it maintains an adherence to the mind-body dichotomy. More specifically, social construction upholds Cartesian dualism by positioning the body as a passive biological instrument. Contemporary social constructionist feminists inadvertently support constructions of feminine passivity via efforts to legislate the protection of female bodies so that patriarchal institutions cannot act upon them.⁵⁶ Although providing women with a right to various corporeal freedoms and protections is undoubtedly positive, Grosz argues that the continued reliance on Cartesian dualism is problematic in that it maintains a social hierarchy by reifying the notion of feminine vulnerability. However, Grosz acknowledges that on one level, we have little choice but to uphold dualism because we have no language with which to describe an entity without implying some kind of opposite: it is nearly impossible to conceptualize that

⁵³ Jones, *Psychic*, 29.

⁵⁴ Underhill, *Missing Link*, 98-99.

⁵⁵ Grosz, *Volatile*, 17.

⁵⁶ Grosz, *Volatile*, 17.

which exists outside socially constructed and ideologically embedded binaries.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, when speaking of “embodied subjectivity,” Grosz says, we must seek “an account which refuses reductionism, resists dualism, and remains suspicious of the holism and unity implied by monism.”⁵⁸ Although it may be useful for us to classify and contain the human body within the bounds of language, the body cannot be contained—it always resists. “If feminists are to resuscitate a concept of the body for their own purposes it must be extricated from the biological and pseudo-naturalist appropriations from which it has historically suffered.”⁵⁹ Grosz goes on to suggest that Victorian-era “biological and pseudo-naturalist appropriations” of female corporeality have endured well into the twentieth-century and are likely to last longer still.

Conclusion

In this essay I have outlined how Cartesian dualism played a significant role in the autobiographies of Spirit mediums by shaping cultural perceptions of the female body and the terms of its entry into the public sphere. This is particularly true for mental mediums who depended upon the biological determinism of dualism to convince the public of their capacity for trance. The women described in this study were able to capitalize on gender stereotypes and otherwise disempowering character traits in order to enter the public sphere.

When considering the relationship between dualism and body limits within the context of nineteenth century femininity, evidently women’s bodies—and the limitations of those bodies—were constructed and policed by dominant patriarchal institutions. Women challenged those limits by drawing on discourses of dualism. In a trance state, a woman could, in theory, temporarily transcend her physical limitations and command authority. However, the same dualistic discourses that insisted on a mind-body split also reinstated body limits by suggesting that the female body was inherently flawed, and therefore an obstacle to be overcome. As such, Cartesian dualism served both to help and to hinder in that it reinscribed the very discourses of debility and constraint that simultaneously empowered and denigrated women.

Victorian-era women knew that in order to draw and retain audiences they were to use cultural ideals of femininity to make their case. In a society that valued feminine vulnerability, they could highlight their disempowerment so as to give the sense that they were upholding the status quo. In a society that valued feminine passivity, they could position themselves as being physically ideal for mediumship, their trances rendering them less threatening as they became ever more submissive. Close readings of spirit mediums’ personal narratives reveal complex discourses concerning the marked nature of feminine corporeality within public spaces, but ultimately they also reveal that the political potential and limitations of the gendered human body are of central importance for an understanding of nineteenth-century women’s autobiography.

⁵⁷ Grosz, *Volatile*, 22.

⁵⁸ Grosz, *Volatile*, 22.

⁵⁹ Grosz, *Volatile*, 20.

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Întruchipând esența: corporalitate, dualism și invenție retorică în autobiografiile din secolul al nouăsprezecelea ale femeilor medium din ședințele de spiritism

O citire foarte atentă a autobiografiilor femeilor-medium din ședințele de spiritism ale secolului al nouăsprezecelea revelă modul în care aceste femei au acumulat suficientă cunoaștere a epocii lor și au câștigat acces la sfera publică. În lumina lecturii feministe făcute de Elizabeth Grosz asupra teoriei dualiste a lui Descartes, acest articol analizează implicațiile diferite ale unor strategii retorice folosite în memoriile privitoare la spiritism ale femeilor-medium. De asemenea, acest studiu se concentrează asupra modului în care femeile autoare de autobiografii și-au reprezentat propria condiție fizică. Narațiunile personale examinate aici sugerează că o conștiință a femeii epocii victoriene privitoare la feminitatea propriului corp ocupă un loc cheie în contextualizările construcțiilor legate de corporalitatea feminină și arată modul în care continuă să complice problematica femeii ca factor de putere.