

For the past 3 years I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork within the transnational Euro-American-Australian community of spiritualist mediums and believers. In particular, I have been interested in the migration online of spiritualist activities – especially its set pieces of séance and home circle - to facilitate remote experiences of traditional practices. While many modern mediums have achieved enhanced visibility and followings in the world of social media, this is truly spiritualism's Covid moment as none of its essential practices can occur in person. Spiritualists are learning how to reconstitute mediumship theory and practice within the new techno-sensory spatial order of the digital. The central goal is to produce spirit presence, using the body as an affective technology. In this paper, I will describe and theorize the production of *presence* in an experimental, physical mediumship Zoom group of which I am a long-standing member.

The internet has enabled spiritualists to build transnational communities of discourse and practice where they are collaboratively producing evidence of consciousness after death. While faithfully maintaining the signs, methods and paraphernalia of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century spirit technologies (photography, electricity, cabinets, trumpets, red light, musical instruments, luminescent paint, the ectoplasmic body), 21<sup>st</sup> century mediums also embrace the internet for sittings, seances, demonstrations, and documentation, over Zoom, Skype, YouTube, and Facebook. In fact, in the spiritualist worldview, the internet is another ethereal realm, one that was intentionally created to be a powerful, electronic technology for the dissemination of knowledge, and the catalyst for the achievement of universal spiritual consciousness. Many, though not all, spiritualists claim that the internet is equally capable of drawing upon the

vibrational energies of humans and spirits alike to breach the boundaries of the corporeal and spirit realms.

Spiritualist discourse has historically employed the term “experimentation” to test and innovate different seance conditions (red light, white light, or total darkness for example) in order to maximize the potential for the manifestation of phenomena, indicating the presence of spirit.

(Spiritualism has historically also enthusiastically endorsed scientific study of the paranormal.)

The prolific uses of the internet to conduct seances, trance channeling and readings, often framed as trial and error experiments, thus figures appropriately in this historical discourse. In the spirit of experimentation, I have spent many hours in both face-to-face and online modalities, learning along with other developing mediums how to manifest the signs of embodied spirit communication. My interest in the understudied, phenomenological dimension of spiritism led me to do training workshops in trance, mental and physical mediumship, as well as joining several circles on Zoom. In these settings, I augment the traditional anthropological practices of thickly descriptive participant-observation and interviewing, with auto-ethnographic, self-monitored narration of my own experiences.

In the completed paper, using the above methods, I will describe and theorize the production of *presence* in an experimental, physical mediumship Zoom group of which I am a long-standing member. Zoom groups that replicate home circles are of particular interest because they perform the most foundational, developmental activity of spiritualism and reinscribe it as a digital methodology to innovatively replicate and compel the experience of spirit *presence*.

This brings me to the concept of *presence* as a central analytic for the exploration of learned, embodied spiritualist practice. *Presence* is a concept that works both culturally, in the sense of spirit presence, and theoretically in virtual, mixed reality or other media environments in which the body becomes anchored in the haptic sense of physical location and “being-there.”

I adapt Hansen’s (2005) work on digital embodiment, as well as anthropological literature on spirit communication (i.e., Gordon 1996) and archival material on the history of spiritualism to map the affective body’s entrainment within the phenomenological structures of a mixed-terrain ritual process.

In the corporeal, shared space of the séance room, affect, sensory experience and emotion build from the successful “blending” of the group, and then the force of encounter with spirit. Zoom circles replicate this aspirational process. While connected through Zoom, the building of group affect through singing, chatting and sharing phenomena raises the vibration and renders individuals more receptive to “being used by spirit”. Signs of spirit presence include unusual body sensation and more unusually, the manifestation of external spirit phenomena. The sitter may experience spirit engagement through proprioception, tactility, hearing, seeing lights and images, and even smell and taste. These sensations and apperceptions recast the sitter from an isolate in a darkened room with a darkened screen, to an energy force that runs like a current to her group of sitters and the “spirit teams” that are always at the ready. Zoom plays a first order role in that in darkness and isolation, as an operational mechanism that keeps sitters engaged with a soundtrack, sing along, and the murmur of unseen voices. This, I believe, works to sustain the body’s affective status “inside” the remote, imagined communities of corporeal sitters and ethereal spirits.

## Citations

Gordon, T. (1996) They loved her too much: Interpreting spirit possession in Tonga. In J. Mageo and A. Howard, eds., *Spirits in Culture and Mind*. NJ: Routledge, pp. 55-74.

Hansen, M. B. N. (2006) *New Philosophy for New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Mediumistic ability falls under two broad categories. Evidential, or mental mediumship, entails readings with clients that enable communication with the spirits of dead loved ones. Much rarer, and highly spectacularized is physical mediumship, in which, while in a state of trance, a substance called ectoplasm flows from the body of the medium, and causes phenomena to visibly, audibly and tactilely materialize in public seances. Mediums of both kinds are achieving greatly increased visibility in the digital world of social media

Spirit guides and human mediums are giving voice to the internet as

Spiritualism has in fact enthusiastically endorsed 21st century technologies and scientific research, just as it did in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as an aspirational blending of science and spirit. The internet is impacting the very, traditional preconditions for certain practices, such as sitting in total darkness, holding hands, hearing the singing of the person sitting next to you and experiencing the collective affect of sitters. Physical mediumship is often now conducted in dim, red light that can be visually and audibly, apprehended on Zoom. Mediums conduct experimental sittings and seances, with each sitter experiencing phenomena in their own darkened room while watching for signs of transfiguration in the medium in “speaker view”.

In Janice Boddy’s definition, spirit possession is a broad term referring to an integration of spirit and matter, force or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable.