

AARON URBANCZYK
Ave Maria University

BODY AND SOUL

A review of Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism*.
Charlotte: University of Virginia Press, 2003. 293 pp. \$39.

IN *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism*, Robert S. Cox creates a new space for an historical reexamination of American Spiritualism. As the title indicates, this history is a “sympathetic” one, hoping to “restore feeling to the dead” voices and communities of the fastest growing religion in ante-bellum America. The Spiritualist notion of sympathy is a remarkably complex and flexible category which had deep and varied social, religious, racial, economic, and philosophical effects upon the fabric of American society. *Body and Soul* amply illustrates that this complexity is largely underrepresented in much of the historical treatment of American Spiritualism. Cox argues that much of the scholarly discussion of American Spiritualism has too quickly strapped a complex religious movement to the Procrustean bed of “instrumentalism,” locating Spiritualism’s historical importance in terms of its ability to valorize and empower marginalized voices and radical reformist ideals. *Body and Soul* seeks to steer the discussion of American Spiritualism away from any such homogenizing historical reading by emphasizing the centrality and multivalent nature of sympathy (as a physical and spiritual phenomenon) in the lived experiences of Spiritualists. Through his analysis of Spiritualism, the guiding principle of which is psychological rather than political or ideological, Cox effectively illustrates the striking historical diversity inherent in American Spiritualists’ experience of “sympathetic community.” The book uncovers the truly polyphonic dimension of American Spiritualism, illustrating with painstaking historical detail the fact that “[t]he spirits spoke in voices that spanned nearly the entire political spectrum of mid-century America, occupying positions . . . that ran from immediate abolition to gradualism to pro-slavery, from egalitarianism to anti-egalitarianism, capitalism to socialism” (19). Cox also emphasizes the important implications of bodily manifestations of spiritual communion. Spiritual mediation and manifestations of sympathy assumed numerous physiological and material forms among American Spiritualists of the 19th century, including mesmerism, somnambulism, séances, spirit channeling,

“spirit photography,” and even Daguerreotypes (which one Spiritualist refers to as “angels’ language”). *Body and Soul* illustrates how such manifestations, which were so central to Spiritualist practices, became metaphorical sites upon which the religious, psychological, medical, racial, and social tensions of mid 19th century America were deeply inscribed.

Spiritualism is frequently interpreted as a religious movement offering a humane corrective to the increasingly isolating experience of nineteenth century modern life. Indeed, such categories as race, class, gender, religious sectarianism, death itself, and even the emerging notion of “privacy” were perceived in modernity as barriers separating members of society from sympathetic congress with each other, resulting in an increasingly fractured and alienated sense of self in the 19th century. In the emerging modern order, the self was experienced as radically cut off from sympathetic ties to family, community, and nation.

Emerging during the winter of 1847-48 as a grass roots religious movement, Spiritualism, with its increasingly rich and complex notions of self, society, and the entire cosmos, offered an attractive alternative (and even proposed corrective) to modern isolation: communion through *sympathy*. For Spiritualists, “sympathy was not mere sentiment”; rather, Cox illustrates “[s]ympathy entailed a complete consonance of emotional and bodily states between persons [living and deceased],” building a sense of community that is simultaneously physical, emotional, and spiritual (81). Spiritualists believed sympathy was egalitarian and could transcend divisive barriers of every type, bridging not only race, class, and gender, but even vast physical distances (spiritualists were known to commune with living “friends” far away) and ultimately the great divide of death itself. Indeed, enjoying sympathetic communion with the dead, through séances, mediums, spirit channeling, and even spirit photography was the central affective community-building activity of American Spiritualists. Spiritualists conceived of both the self and society in transparent and liberating terms. As Cox illustrates, the self for Spiritualists is “porous, unbounded, mutualistically engaged” (165), and Spiritualist social physiology “broke down barriers ... establishing a comprehensive community of [sympathetic] sensation” (80). This religious movement had, of course, practical social impact. Spiritualists were socially progressive meliorists (of one fashion or another) who believed in the inevitability of unbounded social improvements through the practice of sympathy coupled with frequent instruction lavished upon them from loving “spirit friends” (individuals ranging from departed family members and friends to Indian spirit guides and prominent historical luminaries such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin).

Body and Soul is an excellent introduction to American Spiritualism, but Cox goes

far beyond providing a concise portrait of the movement. The great insight and most valuable contribution his copious research affords regards the often ignored and rather striking diversity among American Spiritualists, a diversity he finds inscribed upon the complex notions of the "Spiritualist body." Attentive historical research reveals American Spiritualism is hardly reducible in practice to a vehicle for progressive liberal radicalism of any sort (be the cause abolition, feminism, or other social reforms). In fact, the sympathetic "Spiritualist body" became the site upon which hotly contested issues in psychology, medicine, theology, ethnography, and national identity were passionately argued. This resulted in tremendous diversity of opinion within the Spiritualist community itself.

For instance, somnambulism was understood in a Spiritualist context as motivated by the sympathetic desire for community (with the same physical overtones as the concept that gravity is an attractive force between bodies). "Sleepwalkers," Cox writes, "rose at night to fulfill their waking desires, to share sentiments with the community, to wander, pray ... to heal the sick, find the lost, and visit distant neighbors ... or distant planets" (22-23). The phenomenon of the "somnambular body," once submitted to public and medical scrutiny, quickly became the locus of intense medical, psychological, and even theological debate in mid-nineteenth century America. Yet, Cox reveals somnambular activity unleashed desires that were both comforting and horrific, consistent with social norms and deeply transgressive of them (and not just in socially progressive ways). He explores somnambulists whose interests (and unique gifts) were mostly turned toward the sympathetic circle of their families as well as instances of somnambulists who committed murders in their sleep and unlikely somnambulist preachers (both men and women). Given the diversity of somnambulists activity (both good and bad), Spiritualists were left with the uneasy question of whether the "somnambular self," guided primarily by sympathy and submerged desires, was a "second self" or a reflection of a deeper, true self.

Cox also sheds a great deal of light upon the variety of racial registers current in the Spiritualist communities of 19th century America. His treatment of neglected Spiritualist apologists for slavery such as Robert Hare (to whom George Washington appeared voicing an essentially pro-slavery message), Jesse Babcock Ferguson, and the Swedenborgian physician William Henry Holcombe (whose positions shared much in common with Spiritualist teachings) illustrates the rather strict "limits of sympathy" along the lines of race imposed by some sectors of the Spiritualist community. *Body and Soul* convincingly illustrates that neither Spiritualists nor the "spirits" seemed to be of one mind on the matter of slavery in America.

Along a similar vein, *Body and Soul* includes a remarkable discussion of the Spiritualist engagement with Darwinian theories of evolution which illustrate the increasingly non-egalitarian racial cast of Spiritualist thinking. Through engaging with Darwinian and 19th century evolutionary theories, prominent Spiritualists like “The Spiritual Pilgrim” James M. Peebles, Hudson Tuttle, William Denton, and the influential visionary Andrew Jackson Davis came to a nearly unanimous level of agreement on the matter of essential racial inequalities. Their racial theories, often elaborated through complex depictions of the topography of heaven, indicate a fusion of Spiritualist gradualism and meliorism with theories of human racial evolution which are radically non-egalitarian and imbued with the emerging American ideology of racial whiteness and blackness. While admitting certain differences in their respective theories of racial evolution, Cox illustrates how Peebles, Tuttle, Denton and Davis tend to envision both the spirit realm (heaven) and the direction of world history as informed by an essentialist state of apartheid where the lower (darker) races are gradually improved through sympathetic congress with their natural betters (Aryans or Caucasians) or even led to extinction through the “sympathetic” divine plan for the improvement of humanity.

Body and Soul concludes with a rather provocative reading of the direction Spiritualism took in the aftermath of the Civil War. African-Americans were generally scarce as either members of Spiritualist communities or as visiting “spirit friends” (both before and after the Civil War). Further, Spiritualists began with great frequency in the 1870’s to channel and commune with Indians who came under the guise of friendship and healing, acting as spirit guides for their “palefaced” brethren. Cox argues such phenomena indicate a “shift away from spirit communion based upon familial and friendly ties and away from a conception of heavenly union toward an eternity of racial segregation, etherealized and essentialized” (235). America was increasingly adopting “the increasing incommensurability of race” as a fact of national societal life, and Cox argues Spiritualism mirrored and amplified this trend in the wake of the Civil War. “[W]hite Spiritualists ... did not so much abandon sympathy as transform it,” Cox argues, “emphasizing its power to cohere over its power to transcend” (235). Sympathy became an increasingly racialized concept by which American society could hold itself together rather than a force of nature which could transcend divisive barriers, bringing about universal brotherhood. In light of this shift, Spiritualist practice become much more private, intimate, and personal in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, acting as a haven of sympathetic communion amidst the racially torn fabric of the American landscape.

In *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* Robert S. Cox has provided a remarkably well researched portrait of a religious movement of

tremendous diversity. His work renders the historical perspective upon American Spiritualism much more complex, varied, and inclusive of multiple voices and communities. In so doing, he has provided a great service to the historical study of American religion.

AARON URBANCZYK is Assistant Professor of Literature at Ave Maria University. He has research and teaching interests in American literature, literary criticism and theory, and aesthetics.

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