Spiritualism, Summerland, Slavery in the Afterlife

"The Negro Is the Negro Still"

How spiritualism grappled with slavery and race in the Civil War era

By Emily Sosolik

> [In the Summerland] all distinctions between [African Americans] and white spirits cease to exist, they then having become as white, beautiful, refined, and intellectual as these.[1]
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> — Spiritualist Eugene Crowell*, The Spirit World: Its Inhabitants, Nature, and Philosophy*

The Civil War era produced extraordinary change in nearly every aspect of American life. From the annexation of Texas in 1845 to the end of Reconstruction in 1877, America underwent intense and convulsive political, social, economic, and religious change. The country also was grappling with the polarizing issue of slavery. Amid the upheaval, Americans turned to external sources to find comfort for their internal problems. The salve for confused and broken spirits included religions, political ideologies, social activism, and one peculiar movement that emerged from the Northeast: Spiritualism.

Spiritualism, which was based on communication with the dead received through mediums in the form of 'spirit messages,' grew into a national movement during the Civil War era. The total number of believers ranged from 1 million to 11 million out of a total U.S. population of 31 million.[2] By emphasizing the permeability between this life and the next and thus removing the power of death, Spiritualism was both liberating and disconnecting—adherents could look for hope in the afterlife while being distracted from the real problems on Earth. Although Spiritualism's tenets appeared progressive and reformative, in many ways spirit messages played out like an internal dialogue, safely allowing Spiritualists to express their own fears and confusion over different topics yet never having to take action.

No topic illustrated this dichotomy more than slavery. Much has been written about the egalitarian nature of Spiritualism, but the focus of the present piece is on Spiritualism in practice and how Spiritualists often used the movement to preserve the systemic racism of American society. When confronted with the overarching issue of slavery, Spiritualists used spirit messages to fashion a

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[1] Eugene Crowell*, The Spirit World: Its Inhabitants, Nature, and Philosophy,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1880), 57.

[2] Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 211.

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version of the afterlife called the Summerland which calmed their fears but perpetuated the subservient role of African Americans. And since Spiritualism's focus was inward, on enlightenment of adherents, and upward, on knowledge of the afterlife, the movement invariably distracted from acknowledging, understanding, and remedying the social inequality present on Earth.

From Rappings to Redefining Death: The Basics of Spiritualism

The standard view is that Spiritualism began in the late 1840s with the young sisters Maggie and Kate Fox in their home in Hydesville, New York. When the sisters started to hear unexplained rappings or knocking noises in their house at night, they became convinced that the noises were caused by a deceased man they nicknamed "Mr. Splitfoot," whose bones later were found in their basement. The Fox sisters started to experiment with communicating with Mr. Splitfoot by snapping their fingers and knocking on hard surfaces, and soon they started to interpret rapping noises that came back as a form of spirit communication. This led to a claim that especially-sensitive people could act as "mediums": intermediaries between the physical and spirit worlds. By the mid-1850s, the art of communicating with the dead through techniques such as rappings, séances, automatic writing, and trance messages had evolved into the movement known as Spiritualism that involved both mediums (those who directly received messages from the dead) and adherents (those who participated but were not able to receive spirit messages without the help of a medium).[3]

The growth of Spiritualism reflected the intense religious democratization occurring across America during the early nineteenth century. As scientific discoveries, Transcendentalism, and materialism brought traditional Christian beliefs like the afterlife under question, the country experienced a profound sense of uncertainty and religious upheaval.[4] The resulting religious experimentation known as the Second Great Awakening was fueled by a sense of searching, a distrust of clerical authority, and a need for direct connection with the divine. This awakening continued until the late 1850s and created an "antebellum spiritual hothouse."[5] In this climate of political, social, and religious questioning, the story of the Fox sister's communications with Mr. Splitfoot—which essentially equated to direct access to the other side—instantly caught the attention of reporters. As word spread, the Spiritualist movement quickly gained popularity across America, and by the eve of the Civil War, one in ten adults, not counting enslaved people, were said to consider themselves Spiritualists.[6] The destruction and disillusionment of the Civil War era then

[3] Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 54.

[4] Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 172.

[5] Quoted in Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 9.

[6] Horowitz, *Occult America*, 54, 57.

reportedly brought another 2 million believers into the fold, according to the famous Spiritualist medium Emma Hardinge.[7]

As Spiritualism gained momentum during this period, it became a repository of nineteenth-century religious thought and attracted diverse theories and practices. The result was a polyvocal, decentralized movement lacking a firm doctrinal basis, a movement that pulled inspiration from a staggering number of influences. Its tenets were inspired by the Protestant and post-Protestant sects of the Second Great Awakening (most notably the Quakers, the Shakers, and the Swedenborgian Church), utopian experiments, socialism, phrenology, mesmerism, and even somnambulism.[8] Despite the variety of influences, the movement had common features. First and foremost was the legitimacy of spirit communication, or speaking with the spirits of dead people through mediums. The Spiritualist reformer Gerrit Smith summarized it best: to be a Spiritualist simply meant "to believe that spirits can communicate with us."[9] Another theme was an egalitarian approach to the supernatural, as theoretically anyone could become a medium, although some people proved to be more attuned than others. Scientific empiricism and observable phenomena also played prominent roles in Spiritualist thought, as the planchette (a precursor to the Ouija board), spiritual telegraphy, and spectral photography (such as the daguerreotypes of William Mumler) were used to produce tangible evidence of the other side.

In addition, Spiritualists believed in the progress of mankind, on Earth and in the afterlife. As the Spiritualist S.E. Park declared, progress "is written upon all, and *progression* is the duty of every spirit."[10] Progress was natural and necessary; Spiritualist medium Cora Hatch explained that the "law of progress is everywhere in operation, and the succession of gradation appears to be the general order of Nature."[11] This emphasis on progress eventually led the movement to intersect with other political reform movements, from women's rights to temperance to, finally, abolition.

Conflicting Spirit Messages: Perpetuating Slavery in This Life

Spiritualism attracted an eclectic mix of people from various political and religious backgrounds, many of whom arrived with philosophical baggage that they stuffed into Spiritualism's loose doctrinal framework of spirit communication. While on the surface Spiritualism promoted egalitarianism, the actual opinions of Spiritualists spanned the entire spectrum on the topic of slavery.

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[7] Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 211.

[8] *See generally* Frank Podmore, *Mediums of the Nineteenth Century,* vol. 1 (New Hyde Park, NY, 1963).

[9] Gerrit Smith, *Three Discourses on the Religion of Reason* (New York: Ross & Tousey, 1859), 39.

[10] S.E. Park, *Instructive Communications from Spirit Life* (Boston: W. White and Company, 1869), 16.

[11] Cora L.V. Hatch, *Discourses on Religion, Morals, Philosophy, and Metaphysics,* vol. 1 (New York: B.F. Hatch, 1858), 11.

Some Spiritualists actively and aggressively voiced proslavery opinions and used Spiritualist teachings to back up their arguments.[12] Jesse Babcock Ferguson, a Church of Christ preacher in Nashville who lost his position when he started promoting Spiritualism, firmly believed that slavery originated "in the very necessity of man's fallen condition, and should be regarded as one of the unavoidable results of his natural self-will and insubordination to his earthly career."[13] William Henry Holcombe, a Swedenborgian physician who dabbled in Spiritualism, echoed this sentiment and claimed that Africans were a lesser version of humankind "in whom the spiritual degree could not be opened" and "have ever since lived a savage life, but little elevated above that of brutes."[14]

Other Spiritualists used spirit messages to support their preexisting abolitionist efforts.[15] Abolitionists tended to be more liberal and reform-oriented, which attracted them to the progress-driven tenets of Spiritualism. One prominent example is Thomas Richmond, a respected businessman, acquaintance of Abraham Lincoln, and steadfast Republican who expressed hatred of slavery long before his conversion to Spiritualism in the 1850s.[16] After transitioning through Congregationalism, Universalism, and Methodism and becoming an ardent temperance supporter, Richmond eventually adopted Spiritualism since it allowed him to receive advice about reform from the spirits of great leaders, including Benjamin Franklin, Mary Queen of Scots, and Joan of Arc.[17] Emboldened by spirit messages, Richmond lobbied for emancipation and wrote impassioned letters to President Lincoln urging him to "[p]romise the entire slave population freedom in the event of the success of this government in subduing the rebellious South" and to "[l]et the rallying cry be *freedom, justice,* and *manhood* for the colored race."[18]

Meanwhile, the spirits themselves, from the other side, advocated political positions ranging from proslavery to immediate abolition—in effect, the diverse opinions of the spirits mirrored the diverse beliefs of Spiritualists.[19] Some spirits unequivocally denounced slavery. For instance, in the early spring of 1861, Richmond spoke with "an excellent medium" named Miss Barrett who told him that George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry "all spoke, in the most positive terms . . . [that the] crisis had come, and Slavery must be abolished!"[20] Henri Louis Rey, a Creole of color, and his Spiritualist group *Cercle Harmonique* recorded thousands of pages of

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[12] Cox, *Body and Soul*, 145.

[13] Jesse Babcock Ferguson, *Address on the History, Authority, and Influence of Slavery* (Nashville, TN: J.T.S. Fall, 1850), 6.

[14] William Henry Holcombe, *Suggestions as to the Spiritual Philosophy of African Slavery, Addressed to the Members and Friends of the Church of the New Jerusalem* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1861), 4.

[15] Cox, *Body and Soul*, 163-64.

[16] Thomas Richmond, *God Dealing with Slavery: God's Instrumentalities in Emancipating the African Slave in America* (Chicago: Religio-Philosophical Publishing House, 1870), 50.

[17] Ibid, 43.

[18] Ibid, 100.

[19] Cox, *Body and Soul*, 19.

[20] Richmond, *God Dealing with Slavery*, 75.

spirit messages that repeatedly emphasized "the Great Principles of Fraternal Equality and Liberty"—i.e. a rejection of slavery.[21]

Other spirits, however, conveyed messages that the status of enslaved people would be the same in the afterlife because they carried their race with them. When the Spiritualist Allen Putnam asked a spirit toward the end of the Civil War era if "color or complexion [went] with the spirit to the spirit-land," the spirit answered, "Yes, relatively. . . . [A spirit's color] is translated from the physical to the spiritual world, and affects the spirit after death. The Indian is the Indian still in color as in feature and form. The Negro is the Negro still."[22] Spirit messages from enslaved spirits reinforced this notion. Enslaved spirits typically "prattled away in comic dialect, delivering messages that conveyed anything but abolitionist or egalitarian ideas."[23] Some even expressed forgiveness toward their former masters, acknowledging the horrors of slavery only to undercut the institution's atrocities by claiming that "all was well" because they were set free in the afterlife.[24] One deceased slave from Virginia named Sam waxed sentimental about his days as slave, saying he missed his "massa" even though his "massa" had caused his death.[25]

Still other spirits seemed to have no opinion at all and instead gave vague, benign pronouncements when asked about the status of slaves in the next life. For instance, when a medium asked a spirit during one of Spiritualist Cora Hatch's séances whether African Americans were "the lowest race of men known," the spirit simply replied that "a human and an immortal soul" could be found even "in the lowest form of intelligence."[26]

In short, Spiritualists believed that spirits carried their earthly baggage—beliefs, knowledge, prejudices—into the next life. This concept of shedding the body but keeping the self not only affirmed that whatever Spiritualists believed about slavery and race on Earth was "correct" enough to continue in the next life, but its remnants can be seen today in the common belief that the deceased are waiting on the other side with the same identity they possessed on Earth.

Prioritizing the Afterlife: Dulling Abolitionist Efforts on Earth

Overall, otherworldly concerns took top priority in the Spiritualist movement, which turned adherents' eyes upward rather than outward toward the inequalities present in their temporal lives. Spirit communication oftentimes was used to collect mundane details of the afterlife or answer esoteric inquires, not to address the real problems of slavery and racial inequality on Earth.

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[21] Quoted in Emily Suzanne Clark, "A Luminous Brotherhood: Afro-Creole Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2014), 192.

[22] Allen Putnam, *Flashes of Light from the Spirit Land, through the Mediumship of Mrs. J.H. Conant* (Boston: William White, 1872), 373.

[23] Cox, *Body and Soul*, 168.

[24] Ibid.

[25] *Banner of Light*, November 7, 1857, 7.

[26] Hatch, *Discourses on Religion*, 353.

Spiritualist Allen Putnam, for example, recorded lengthy conversations with spirits about whether they could "eat the fruit of their fruit trees" in the afterlife or if death by drowning or bruising "retards separation of the spiritual form."[27]

Consequently, Spiritualism perpetuated a distinctly deterministic attitude about slavery. For many Spiritualists humans were at the mercy of the divine will. If spirits ever discussed the abolition of slavery, they urged Spiritualists to wait for divine intervention, which ended up dulling abolitionist impulses. At one Spiritualist-abolitionist meeting in Michigan, the main message preached was that "the *spirits* would, without doubt, bring about the emancipation of the race," and that message was the extent of their plan.[28] Similarly, Spiritualist medium Emma Hardinge explained that some Spiritualists did not bother participating in abolitionist efforts "in the belief that the inevitable tendency of Spiritualism was to promote the freedom of all mankind in better and more effective methods than those insisted on [in abolitionist parties]."[29]

According to some of the spirits, the conflict over slavery during the Civil War era had been inevitable and could not be remedied by abolitionist efforts. Hardinge recorded that some contraband mediums in Memphis prophesied about the war for years and had been told that it was the only way "dat all colored people, poor slaves, should be free."[30] They even were warned that more suffering was to come. The spirits said that "after many year de color people should pass away like de red man, and be no more in dis country," a premonition they did not like but learned to accept since "de Lord knows what's best, bless him."[31] Since the focus was on the afterlife, many Spiritualists also accepted that the spirits controlled the density of the country during the Civil War. The Spiritualist businessman Thomas Richmond was told by the spirit of Benjamin Franklin that "the spirits control your war to a great extent, and it is within [the spirits'] power of action to suspend hostilities when it is best."[32] Even though Richmond was a staunch abolitionist, his Spiritualist beliefs caused him to accept that abolishing slavery, and the war itself, was out of everyone's control.

Spirit communication about abolition really revealed the motivations of adherents more than anything else. White guilt probably played a role in the spirit messages about abolition since many times spirits "came through mediums to reassure them that they, at least, were intervening for the slaves on Earth by comforting them and softening the hearts of their masters."[33] The spirits of white historical figures often would express regret about not acting to end slavery. The spirit of Daniel Webster, for instance, told the *Cercle Harmonique* that he apologized for not endorsing abolition and

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[27] Putnam, *Flashes of Light from the Spirit Land*, 363, 366.

[28] Quoted in Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 147.

[29] Emma Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion between Earth and the World of Spirits* (NY: The Author, 1870), 406.

[30] Ibid, 498.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Richmond, *God Dealing with Slavery*, 82-83.

[33] Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 137.

that he "had been led to believe, through the many errors of this earthly world, that [he] was superior to a certain class of [his] brethren."[34]

Freedmen of color also used spirit messages to explore their inner conflicts. Creole Spiritualist Henri Louis Rey recorded numerous pro-abolition spirit communications before the Civil War, yet slavery remained a daily part of his life in New Orleans. Not only did he volunteer to fight for the Confederacy, but his father owned eight slaves.[35] In these cases, spirit messages were a form of internal dialogue that allowed Spiritualists to explore their confusion over slavery while not forcing them to fully confront their beliefs or change their behavior.

Envisioning the Summerland: Preserving Slavery in the Next Life

In addition to conflicting spirit messages, the elaborate Spiritualist conception of heaven, known as the Summerland, served as a way for believers to both address and avoid the issue of slavery. The focus on the afterlife was Spiritualism's most important aspect insofar as it was the one quality of the movement that united all believers.[36] Spiritualism propounded that the afterlife was a place of enlightenment, education, and equality, but only to an extent. Death was not a permanent separation or the biblical place where humans connected with God. Instead, it was a temporary passing to another perfect and eternal life where relationships with family and friends continued and the deceased maintained their identities.[37]

Spiritualism's view of the afterlife can be traced back to Swedenborgian thought. In the eighteenth century, the popular scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg presented a distinct configuration of heaven that consisted of "spheres." He claimed this truth was revealed to him by angelic forms.[38] Inspired by Swedenborg's writings, Andrew Jackson Davis presented a similar version of heaven in his 1847 lectures *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*. Unlike Swedenborg, Davis believed that his revelations were given to him by spirits and that spirits could progress through the spheres.[39] According to Davis, heaven was "a system of seven concentric spheres inhabited by beings of increasing spiritual advancement, and the inhabitants of higher spheres were engaged in showering the lower spheres with a steady influx of spirit, illuminating mortal life and providing moral and spiritual edification."[40] This progress-driven version of heaven became known as the Summerland and quickly was grafted onto the movement, to such

[34] Quoted in Clark, "A Luminous Brotherhood," 194.

[35] Ibid, 192-93.

[36] Cox, *Body and Soul*, 19.

[37] Ibid, 182-183.

[38] Clark, "A Luminous Brotherhood," 55.

[39] Ibid, 57.

[40] Cox, *Body and Soul*, 13.

an extent that a general consensus existed among Spiritualists about the geography of heaven by the 1850s.[41]

In the Summerland, spirits did not face the threat of going to hell or being trapped in purgatory. Instead, spirits would enter the lowest sphere and would rise successively as they attained knowledge and wisdom about earthly and heavenly affairs. The progress through the spheres of enlightenment in the Summerland again reflected Spiritualism's emphasis on progress. As S.E. Park explained, "Spirit-life is but a continuation of mundane-life; the mind or spirit is the same; no change is produced by its leaving the body; and it remains the same, until, by our own exertions, advancement commences."[42] Therefore, in many ways, the afterlife was a continuation of earthly life, as habits, relationships, and occupations carried over—as did race.

This notion of race carrying into the next life was problematic in more ways than one for African Americans during the Civil War era. If the afterlife was a continuation of earthly life, and if race was an internal feature that people retained for eternity, then the role of African Americans and enslaved people in heaven arguably would not be improved. The status of African Americans in the Summerland was oftentimes just a step above slavery as they were segregated and confined to the lowest spheres of enlightenment.[43] African American spirits, whether free or enslaved in their earthly lives, went to separate, lower parts of heaven that many times resembled Africa. Spirits revealed to Spiritualist Eugene Crowell that "[n]ational distinction and boundaries exist in the heavens," and the "African negro there finds the counterpart of his native jungle, and a modified tropical climate."[44] Sometimes formerly-enslaved spirits were able to advance beyond the lower realms by rejoining their masters as slaves; Crowell shared that "if [past slaves] desire to do so, and their former masters or employers also desire it, [the slaves can] join the latter and resume their former relations in a modified form and advance with them."[45] Many Spiritualists claimed that this arrangement was chosen by the spirits, not forced upon them, because spirits were believed to attract other spirits with similar internal qualities in the afterlife. Spiritualist Gerrit Smith said, "A wicked man attracts wicked spirits, and a good man good ones".[46]

Even more troubling was the concept of "whitening" in the afterlife. Since heaven was a place of progress, Spiritualists like Robert Hare and William Henry Holcombe often spoke of how white spirits in the afterlife attained enlightenment. White spirits would advance through the spheres, gain knowledge and wisdom, and be "restored to the appearance of youth."[47] But blackness (as Holcombe wrote, the "black skin, the wooly hair, the thick lips, the shallow skull, the flat nose")

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[41] Lehman, *Victorian Women*, 106.

[42] Park, *Instructive Communications,* 16.

[43] Cox, *Body and Soul*, 230.

[44] Crowell*, The Spirit World*, 55.

[45] Ibid, 58.

[46] Smith, *Three Discourses on the Religion of Reason*, 39.

[47] Robert Hare, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations, Demonstrating the Existence of Spirits and Their Communion with Mortals* (New York, Partridge & Brittan, 1855), 149.

was perceived as an outward reflection of inwardly imperfection, so many Spiritualists believed that the progress of African American spirits in heaven was different: it was linked to literally shedding their blackness and becoming whiter.[48] Echoing Putnam, Crowell explained that a "Negro is [in heaven] still a Negro, although . . . as they progress, [they] constantly assimilate in appearance and character to the white race" and assume a lighter color.[49] Crowell claimed to know other Spiritualists who had visited heaven in trances, and they reported "the majority of the Negro spirits, in their lowest sphere, to be as black as the majority of our Negros, but in their third heaven they were considerably lighter in color, with modified and improved features, but still the majority of them were unmistakably Negros."[50] As African American spirits ascended higher through their designated spheres, "all distinctions between them and white spirits cease to exist, they then having become as white, beautiful, refined, and intellectual as these."[51] So while progress for white spirits translated to personal enlightenment, progress for African American spirits translated to shedding the flawed internal condition of blackness. If blackness was not shed, then progress was denied.[52]

Leaving the Spirit World Behind: The Decline and Legacy of Spiritualism

The conflicting beliefs of Spiritualists over the issue of slavery and race led to a general sense of internal chaos as the Civil War era progressed. The movement's cracking façade was on display at the Spiritualists' First National Convention in 1864. While some Spiritualists called for political mobilization and a centralized organization similar to contemporary antislavery groups, others wanted the movement to remain decentralized so the focus could remain on the afterlife.[53] By the end, the only political agreement the Spiritualists came to was to support Lincoln for a second term.[54] The divergence of views and approaches within the movement, along with the movement's disorganization and decentralization, made it impossible for Spiritualism to be a force for political change and certainly helped lead to the movement's decline around the turn of the century.

In many respects, the appeal of Spiritualism during the Civil War era was quite simple. Even though its focus was on the otherworldly, it had the ability to feel very familiar. Spiritualism was constructed around the pre-existing beliefs of its adherents and did not demand any transformative self-reflection. Spiritualism allowed its adherents to carry their opinions about slavery and their racist tendencies with them, use spirit communication to explore their own frustrations, and fashion a heaven that appeared very similar to Earth. The emphasis was inward, not outward, and adherents

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[48] Holcombe, *Suggestions*, 4.

[49] Crowell*, The Spirit World*, 55, 57.

[50] Ibid, 57.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Spiritualism's reimagining of the Christian afterlife greatly impacted how Americans viewed death during the Civil War era, and the impact persists to this day. For more about Americans' changing views of death during this time, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

[53] Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 208.

[54] Ibid.

would find only what they were searching for, nothing more and nothing less. While adherents accepted that the mysteries of the afterlife may never be known, enslaved people waited to be granted freedom on Earth.

The lesson of Spiritualism also is quite simple. When it came to slavery and race, adherents used communicating with the dead as a way to seek external justification for their internal beliefs. By pointing to the outward, mystical force of the afterlife, they avoided critically analyzing the ultimate earthly impact of their beliefs. To Spiritualists, if all-knowing spirits from the Summerland confirmed a belief, then certainly it did not require evaluation. We too must consider the external forces we seek for validation and wonder which of our internal beliefs escape evaluation.

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