

MANIFESTING SPIRITS

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Jack Hunter

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*For Rosie, Nils, and Alice, and everyone
who has helped and put up with me over the
long years spent writing this book.*

*This book is also dedicated to the memory
of Edie Turner, whose pioneering explorations
have been a source of continuous inspiration.*

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ABSTRACT

This book is an exploration of contemporary trance and physical mediumship with a particular emphasis on issues related to altered states of consciousness, personhood, performance, and the processes by which spirits become manifest in social reality. A major component of the book is given over to an examination of anthropology's evolving attitudes towards the "paranormal" as a component of the "life-worlds" of many people across the globe. The book works towards developing a non-reductive anthropological approach to the paranormal, and mediumship in particular, that does not attempt to explain away the existence of spirits in terms of functional, cognitive, or pathological theories, but that rather embraces a *processual* perspective that emphasises complexity and multiple interconnected processes underlying spirit possession performances. This non-reductive approach is arrived at through a combination of ethnographic observation during séances, and interviews with trance and physical mediums at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, a private non-denominational spiritualist home-circle in Bristol, literature reviews covering the anthropology, psychology, neurophysiology, and parapsychology of spirit possession, and cross-cultural comparison with other mediumistic traditions to uncover core processes.

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A-Level, Access, and undergraduate students who have had to endure my frequent tangents on mediumship and the paranormal in their religious studies, psychology, and sociology lessons at college. Finally, I am immensely grateful to all my family and friends for their encouragement throughout this process.

NOTE

This book was written over a long period of time, beginning in 2009 with my first encounter with mediumship at the Bristol Spirit Lodge while still an undergraduate student; it was finished as a doctoral thesis at the end of 2017, and finally transformed into its current form in 2020. Over the years I have been active in writing academic and popular articles about my research and ideas, which have appeared in various journals, magazines, and blogs. Revised, edited, and expanded portions of these articles form the basis of many of the chapters in this book.¹ I have always considered my research to be an ongoing process—as something that I am always working at—and always intended that these articles would become, in one form or another, *this* book.

¹Portions of Chapter 1 have been revised and expanded from the Introduction to Hunter (2012b). Chapter 2 features elements of Hunter (2010). Chapter 3 is a fully expanded version of Hunter (2011a), 3.9 is an expanded version of Hunter (2014b), and 3.10 features elements from Hunter (2012c). Chapter 5 contains elements of Hunter (2015b). Chapter 6 features revised sections of Hunter (2012d). Chapter 7 is a fully revised and expanded version of Hunter (2014a).

INTRODUCTION

Anomalous experiences in a garden shed

Spiritualism is the name given to a complex of beliefs and practices that emerged in America in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is often confused with the more general term “spirituality”, but while we can probably say that all Spiritualists are “spiritual” (to some extent) we cannot say that all “spiritual” people are Spiritualists. Spiritualism is built around the idea that it is possible to communicate with discarnate spirits (usually of the dead). This dialogue is facilitated through special individuals known as “mediums”—people who provide a psychic link between the world of the living and the world of the dead, often through the cultivation of altered states of consciousness. There are two ways in which the term “spiritualism” is frequently used—either as referring to the *general* belief that it is possible to communicate with spirits (spiritualism, with a little “s”), or in reference to a formally organised religious movement (Spiritualism, with a capital “S”). The Spiritualist movement began as a paranormal event centred upon three teenage sisters in New York State in 1848, and rapidly blossomed into a global religious movement. Today, in the UK, where the fieldwork that underpins this book was conducted, Spiritualism is epitomised by the activities of the

Spiritualists' National Union (SNU)—the official body regulating Spiritualist churches, and the mediums that serve them, across the country. This book, however, is primarily concerned with spiritualism (with a little “s”), specifically the kind of spiritualism practised at the Bristol Spirit Lodge—an independent mediumship development circle, now based in Clevedon, near Bristol, that has no formal links to the SNU.

A séance, from the French for “sitting”, is a loosely-structured ritual during which a medium initiates contact with the spirits so as to enable a dialogue with the gathered “sitters”—lay folk who regularly come to ask questions of the spirits. It was as an undergraduate student in the winter of 2009—the final year of my degree in archaeology and anthropology at the University of Bristol—that I first attended a séance at the Bristol Spirit Lodge. Much to my surprise, the Lodge itself was a specially constructed wooden shed at the bottom of a neat garden in Filton, a suburb of Bristol.² What I experienced in that unassuming garden shed entirely exceeded my expectations and challenged my initial preconceptions—if truth be told, I didn't really know what to expect, or what I was getting myself into.

There had been a heavy snowfall during the night that gave the day a brilliant glow in the bright early morning light. Everything felt crisp, the air was cold, and I felt alert, if a little nervous—not least because I had to trek along treacherous ice-covered pavements to get to the Spirit Lodge, which was about a twenty-minute walk from my student accommodation. I was the first to arrive. Christine (the founder of the Lodge) expressed her concern that I wasn't going to turn up. She was glad that I

²Although it was not on my radar at the time, recent developments in my thinking—especially revolving around the ideas explored in *Greening the Paranormal* (Hunter, 2019)—have drawn me back to a reconsideration of the role of the garden itself as an “ante-chamber to the netherworld” (Conan, 2007, p. 7), indeed there are long traditions worldwide of using gardens in this way, for spiritual purposes. This is not quite the place for a complete exploration of this intriguing rabbit hole, which will be taken up in a future publication, but I did recently ask Christine about this, and her answer provides some interesting food for thought:

“... initially when the ‘shed’ was built and sitters left the house and walked to the shed I personally felt that it increased the ‘fun’ and ‘adventure’ elements ... what we were about to do felt like a ‘secret’ ... As we adjusted to the shed I’d personally often sit out there with the door open and look out into the garden ... which felt kind of ‘spiritual’ ... like the ‘shed’ was natural ... an integral part of nature. The same effect was recreated here when we moved house” (interview with Christine, August 2019).

had though—some of her regular sitters would not be attending because of the weather, but the morning’s séance was still scheduled to go ahead. They needed someone to make up the numbers. She directed me through into the dining room, where she had laid the table out with named place mats for the expected guests. I was offered a cup of tea, and drank it as I chatted politely to Christine about what I should expect to experience during the séance. She told me it was best *not to expect anything at all!* As I sat pondering this, feeling very much out of my comfort zone, and looking around the dining room (in which Christine had a glass-fronted bookcase containing numerous books on mediumship, Spiritualism, and popular science), the doorbell rang. Christine rushed to answer. It was Sandy, the medium who would be sitting this morning, followed shortly by Margaret and Lynne, two of the Lodge’s regular sitters. The atmosphere was warm, informal, and friendly—it was clear that Christine, Margaret, Lynne, and Sandy were very close and that they were enjoying themselves in familiar surroundings. In all respects they seemed to me to be “normal” twenty-first-century British women. As we sat around Christine’s large dining room table I listened to them sincerely and very matter-of-factly describe their own séance experiences while drinking tea and eating biscuits—weird apparitions, anomalous movement of objects, ectoplasmic materialisations, and other paranormal events. I became increasingly apprehensive, but tried not to let it show. I didn’t know what to expect, and the thought of potentially experiencing *real* paranormal phenomena was both thrilling and a little bit frightening.

Once we had all finished our tea, Christine gave us a quick run-through of the séance protocol. We were asked to remove all jewellery, and to completely empty our pockets of any loose change before going out to the Lodge—the metal, we were told, could interfere with the spirits’ attempts to materialise. Under no circumstances were we allowed to bring electronic equipment into the Lodge for recording purposes—no mobile phones, no hand-held tape recorders, no concealed video cameras—nothing. Christine explained that she would be making her own recording of the séance, which would be uploaded to the Lodge’s website along with numerous others in their archive. We all agreed to these terms, left our belongings on our place mats, and followed Christine out into the garden.

Inside the Lodge, Christine, Margaret, Lynne, and I sat in a semi-circle on padded office chairs with blankets on our laps to keep us warm. It was cold in the small building. We took off our shoes and placed them

neatly under our chairs. Sandy sat in a high-backed Parker Knoll armchair that was positioned in a curtained-off corner of the room known as the “cabinet”—a direct descendant of the early Spiritualist spirit cabinet séances of the Victorian era. She wore a red fleece jumper and loose jogging trousers with stripy rainbow-coloured socks to keep her body warm while she was in trance. Once we had settled in our seats, Christine read the opening prayer from a laminated sheet attached to a clipboard. The stationery caught my attention—if she had been wearing a white lab coat at this moment Christine would have been indistinguishable from a research scientist—this was not something that I had expected, particularly in the context of a prayer. Somehow I had managed to find myself in the *interstices between science and religion*. When the prayer ended she pressed play on a small CD player and switched off the lights, before gradually turning up a red light using a make-shift dimmer switch attached to a piece of wood. The big red light bulb, which was hooded over with dark card so that it could be directed into the cabinet like a spotlight, generated a warm, womb-like, and slightly eerie glow. Although the light levels were low in the Lodge, everyone could clearly be seen sitting quietly with blankets on their laps, and we could all see Sandy sitting between the curtains on either side of the cabinet. She shut her eyes and started her trance induction process.

Sandy sat motionless in the cabinet to begin with, her arms resting lightly on her lap and her head just slightly tilted forward. We watched in silence for a couple of tracks on the CD, as Sandy sat breathing deeply. Then something unusual started to happen. Her face appeared—at least from my own subjective perspective—to *change*. It became increasingly difficult for me to focus on her features, which seemed to shift and fade. While Sandy descended deeper into her trance state, breathing heavily in the gloom of the red light, I saw small flashes of white and blue that flickered in front of my eyes, and at one point thought that I saw the face of the entranced medium morph and transform to resemble someone else entirely—an oriental monk’s face—before the mask-like apparition slid spookily down the medium’s face and chest, dissolving as it descended. At one point her features seemed to shift weirdly—to distort—and it looked as though her head had disappeared completely, leaving a dark empty space just above her shoulders.

I will state from the outset that I could not tell whether these experiences were *objectively real* (that is, correlating with objective/physical transformations of the medium’s features, for example) or whether

they were some form of hallucination, perhaps induced by the red light, or some other combination of factors. Either way, the aetiology of the experience doesn't really matter at this juncture (though we will consider it in greater detail later). For the time being it is enough to say that they were, at the least, genuine *experiences* (if nothing else) that seemed to accord well with the beliefs and expectations of my informants, and so (for me at least) they represented a partial validation of the world view they had told me about over tea and biscuits before the séance. My first encounter with trance mediumship, therefore, demonstrated that, in the context of the séance room at least, anomalous experiences *do occur*—whatever their ultimate causes and ontological underpinnings may be. The uncommon experiences I had in the Lodge on that cold morning are one of the main reasons I continued to pursue research into the spirit mediumship practices of the Lodge and its members beyond my undergraduate dissertation.

In addition to my own *semi-subjective* visionary experiences (I say *semi-subjective* because my "vision" of the oriental monk's face was later corroborated by Margaret during a conversation at the end of the séance), there was another aspect of the séance performance that particularly caught my attention: the trance state of the medium. It was clear to me from the beginning of the séance that Sandy was experiencing a genuine altered state of consciousness—her eyes remained tightly shut throughout the séance, while her hands and legs twitched and moved spasmodically. When distinctive spirit personalities eventually started to speak through her body, her entire physical and behavioural demeanour was transformed, as were her vocal tones.

Inside the cabinet, behind the folds of the curtain we could see Sandy's arms and legs moving about in the red light. Her hands contorted as she pushed her body backwards into the heavy chair. Before long she was making grunting, growling, and coughing sounds—sounds that I didn't expect the quiet and polite woman I had met an hour or so ago to make. The growling and gurgling noises continued for a while, as Christine tried to coax the incoming spirit to talk to us. Christine reassured the visiting spirit that Sandy's spirit-team would help to make talking easier. She turned and explained to me that this was only the second time *the Soldier* had made himself known to the circle, so his connection with the group was still quite weak and he did not yet have a rapport with the sitters. Sandy's movements were erratic—her arms and legs pulled and pushed the chair as the spirit voice frustratingly strained

to grumble through. The few words that were discernible seemed to suggest that gravity felt strange to the Soldier—that he was no longer used to physical weight that comes with being embodied in matter. He tried to express to us just how strange it was that he had never noticed what gravity *felt* like while alive—he had simply taken it for granted. Unfortunately the Soldier wasn't able to say much more than this—his connection was too weak for a sustained dialogue.

As the séance progressed, Christine turned up the music when it became clear that the spirit no longer wanted to talk, or was no longer able to. Each time a spirit left her body Sandy would go limp and fall back into the chair. After the Soldier's deep vocalisations she had some trouble with her throat. Her primary spirit control, Joseph (the spirit of a twelve-year-old Native American boy), expressed his dislike of the taste of *ectoplasm* in the medium's throat, which he explained had been necessary to allow the Soldier to speak in such a startlingly different manner to the medium's normal voice. When the spirit was talking, so we were told, an ectoplasmic voice box was formed in the medium's throat, which was controlled and manipulated by the incorporating spirit. He explained how ectoplasm is a semi-physical substance that is used by spirits to manifest in our physical world—in a sense it may be thought of as a *bridge between spirit and matter*.

After a brief musical interlude another spirit made itself known to the group. His name was Elf—a regular visitor to the Lodge with a strong and distinctive personality, not like the Soldier. Elf was very active through Sandy's body, his motions were playful, cheeky, and childlike in many ways. He wasn't afraid of telling Christine to "Shut up!", for example, and was clearly performing the archetypal role of the *trickster* during the séance (Hansen, 2001). Christine explained to Elf that there was someone new in the circle (referring to me) who hadn't met him before. He responded with what I came to realise was his own characteristic indifference—Elf simply didn't care what I thought of him and cheerfully repeated the lines:

I am me, I am free, I just be,
I am me, I am free, I just be,
I am me, I am free, I just be ...

In retrospect I wonder whether there was an important message about the nature of spirits contained in Elf's whimsical statement, offered up

very early on in my inquiry. After a while Elf went on to explain how sometimes Joseph, Sandy's primary spirit control, would only allow him to occupy certain parts of Sandy's body, specifically her knees and legs. It was apparently possible for Elf to inhabit Sandy's legs, for example, at the same time as another spirit was using her vocal chords to talk with the sitters. This accounted for the medium's often erratic-looking behaviour while in trance. In his high-pitched voice, Elf explained his purpose in communicating was not philosophising, or teaching about the spirit world—he preferred to leave that task for other more interested spirits. Instead, Elf's primary motivation was fun. He also told us that he was *still* (evidently he had been working at it for some time) attempting to make Sandy's physical body levitate above the ground. He was adamant that one day he *would* succeed in performing this extraordinary feat.

Several other spirits came forward that morning before Joseph decided that the sitting should be drawn to a close. The connection to the spirit world was severed for the time being, and the spirits receded back from where they came. The close of the séance was signalled with more music—this time a short instrumental piece performed by Hank Marvin and The Shadows. The proceedings were capped off with Christine's reading of the closing prayer. Once Sandy had safely returned to normal consciousness, after a few moments of drowsy confusion, the lights were switched back on, and after her eyes had adjusted, we all went back into the house for tea, cake, and conversation. The snow outside made the early afternoon winter sunlight exceptionally brilliant in contrast to the mysterious red gloom of the séance room we left behind. I felt invigorated, but didn't know why, and wasn't quite sure what I had just experienced.

When we were in the house I asked Sandy what it felt like to go into trance. She said she didn't know what to say. She couldn't put it into words. When I asked about the types of mediumship she was developing she responded by saying, "I have been *told* I practise physical, trance, and transfiguration mediumship. I know spirits talk through me, some things have moved in my presence when in trance, and I aid healing." Her comment suggested that she was not conscious, or at least wholly conscious, of her mediumistic activities during séances. This inability to recall events that take place while in trance is referred to in the parapsychological literature as "mediumistic amnesia" (Rock, 2013, p. 7), and is a cross-cultural feature of many mediumship practices

and traditions. In anthropology and religious studies, the amnesic quality of the medium's experience has classically been used as a point of distinction between the practices of spirit mediums on the one hand and shamans on the other. During the mediumistic state, the medium's consciousness is displaced by that of the spirit occupying their body—in essence, the medium is no longer present. For the shaman, however, their primary role and function is to *bring back* information from the spirit world—in order to perform this function the shaman must be able to recall their trance excursion (Eliade, 1989; Jokic, 2008b). In reality, however, this distinction is not always so clear-cut.

These features of Sandy's mediumship performance also accorded well with classic anthropological accounts of spirit possession and other ecstatic magical and religious practices, recorded in vastly different cultural contexts around the world (Lewis, 1971; Bourguignon, 2007; Schmidt & Huskinson, 2010; A. Dawson, 2010; Hunter & Luke, 2014). It was also evident from this first séance at the Bristol Spirit Lodge that their practices, and the experiences that arise from them, aligned with accounts of spirit mediumship from the history and literature of psychical research (Gauld, 1982; Rock, 2013). Combined with the apparent sincerity of my informants, these correspondences suggested that I was dealing with a *genuine human experience*. In other words, with Sandy I felt sure that she was not trying to fool me—she was not “pretending”. Sandy seemed to me like a modern-day Oracle—sitting in the corner of the darkened séance room, providing a conduit for communication between the mundane world of suburban life and the extraordinary world of spirits and the dead.

Another element of my early encounters with the Bristol Spirit Lodge that caught my attention was the apparent complexity of the spirits themselves. Far from being abstractions with little real-world relevance, the spirits I encountered at the Bristol Spirit Lodge were both *immanent* and *tangible*. Indeed, they were manifested in three-dimensional space through the bodies of their entranced mediums. These spirits could be talked to and questioned directly, and even interacted with physically through their hosts. I would eventually come to see that each of the spirits at the Lodge presented themselves (physically and psychologically) in a surprisingly distinctive and consistent manner across weeks, months, and even years of development. Through this process the spirits were able to build up a friendly, usually jovial relationship

with regular sitters at the Lodge. Furthermore, these spirit entities apparently possessed a real form of active agency the world. The spirits were clearly able to affect change in the social world that surrounded them—they were social actors quite capable of influencing the actions and behaviours of the social circle that built up to support and develop them. It became clear to me quite early on that the spirits and the group were mutually sustaining one another in a sort of symbiotic feedback relationship.

To briefly summarise, the following were my primary reasons for wanting to pursue further research into the practices of the Bristol Spirit Lodge beyond my initial undergraduate dissertation (Hunter, 2009):

1. The apparent *genuineness* of the medium's altered state of consciousness, indicative of an underlying experiential dimension to spirit mediumship.
2. The apparent *immanence* of the spirits I encountered in the field. The spirits were not lofty abstractions, but *tangible realities*—talking to us directly from the corner of the room we were sitting in.
3. The apparent *complexity* of their personalities (not in all cases, however).
4. The spirits I encountered were at the very least *socially real*, in fact they were the main social actors in an ongoing discourse between the living and the dead.
5. My own subjective experiences, which seemed to resonate with the beliefs and experiences of Lodge members.

All of this led me to the conclusion that there was something much more complex going on in this suburban garden shed than the usual explanations of fraud, trickery, delusion, and pathology could adequately account for (Hunter, 2009). Indeed, there seemed to be more going on than the dominant anthropological models of social functionalism and cognitive science could comfortably explain (at least in their simplest forms). This book, therefore, represents the fruit of my labour in trying to gain a deeper understanding of what this phenomenon actually is, what it means, how we might best go about interpreting and understanding it, and how best to approach questions of experience and ontology in ethnographic research. This is achieved through the development of a non-reductive interpretive framework that emphasises *complexity* and

multiple dimensions of process and meaning. In other words, an approach that sees spirit mediumship as multifaceted, involving multiple simultaneous processes (psychological, physiological, sociological, psi, spirits, etc.), and that does not seek to reduce the significance of spirit mediumship to purely functional, psychological, sociological, or cognitive explanations.