

The Elementary Traces of Psychic Mediumship

Anthony Thanh Huy Do

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Introduction

It was two weeks into 2012, and I couldn't postpone calling Joyce, the psychic medium who had become the focus of my research project, any longer. I had not spoken with her since my initial visit with her in Detroit at the beginning of December, six weeks prior, and I had to make plans to see her again soon. I had put off calling, not because I didn't want to speak with her but because my trip to Los Angeles over the holidays had been emotionally draining. My grandmother was in the hospice when I left, barely conscious when I said goodbye to her, and just lucid enough to understand that it would be the last time she would hear my voice. I clearly remember what I was doing when I was informed about her death, which happened only a few days after I returned to New York. I had a student ticket for Mehta's performance of Bruckner's 8th Symphony, and in my front row seat I received a text message from my father telling me that she had passed. If there is an appropriate soundtrack for the passage into the afterlife it would be Bruckner's 8th, which incidentally is also known by the nickname *The Apocalyptic*.

I planned on not telling Joyce that I had gone back to Los Angeles and decided to avoid saying anything about my grandmother's funeral. I was trying to find my own way of mourning and knew that Joyce might say something about seeing an apparition, or that my grandmother had a message for me, which I was not prepared to deal with. Perhaps my discomfort with the idea of Joyce's talking about my grandmother in this way was another reason I had delayed calling her. Not only was it too soon for me, I had not yet figured out how to separate the thesis project from my personal life. I was already feeling anxiety from hearing Joyce's fantastic accounts and then experiencing similar things myself. For example, my sister Stephanie refused to talk to me until I saw her at the funeral, and it was then that she told me about an experience

that she had for the first time in her life that became a source of both concern and terror.

Stephanie had a premonition of our grandmother's death in a dream the night before she passed.

She found herself sobbing in the dream and woke up in the same state, a process that repeated throughout the night. However Stephanie informed me that she was crying not because of our grandmother but because of me, and for a reason she did not understand. She couldn't talk to me because she was afraid something was going to happen to me. That same week Sanda, my former professor from CalArts, sent me an email from Romania to tell me that she had also experienced something unusual:

It happened a couple of weeks ago while I was laying down semi-conscious. At that point, boom! It was like a big push, a large amount of electric or other form of energy came thru... It found me upright and walking on an unknown street. This energy was somebody's walking behind me and that somebody was you. Although neither I nor you were our familiar selves. There was like an identity shift. This never happened to me before. The way I described, it doesn't look exceptional but it was. What it means is unknown but it was and still is startling... Like an alternative space/time body/mind state.

I asked Sanda, who received her Ph.D. in Art History from UCLA, if the experience she was describing was a dream, and she replied, "It was not a dream, it was different from any reality or dream."

When I finally spoke with Joyce, I avoided the subject of my grandmother and instead asked about her health and whether or not she had received my Christmas card. I proposed some potential dates to visit her, and she agreed to let me stay with her again in March during Spring Break. During our telephone conversation, from out of the blue, Joyce said to me, "Tony, I think

someone is here for you.” I remained silent. Then she asked, “Do you know somebody by the name ‘Fem’?”

Puzzled, I replied, “No, I’ve never heard of that name.”

“They keep saying ‘Fem,’ ‘Fem.’”

“Nope.”

“Ok now I’m getting... P-H-A-M.”

I recognized the spelling and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. “Joyce, that’s my grandmother’s maiden name. She passed away last week. I didn’t want to tell you because I’m still mourning her loss and didn’t want to hear you say anything about her spirit coming back.”

“Wow... I’m terribly sorry to hear that Tony. I can tell that she really loves you. She just wants you to know that she’s o.k.”

Not only did I not mention my grandmother’s death to Joyce, I should add that on no occasion did I ever disclose my grandmother’s name to her either. Under those circumstances, it is easy to understand why I was shocked. But to truly comprehend the extent of the horror and amazement I felt requires a consideration of the subtlety of the Vietnamese language from which my grandmother’s name is derived as well as knowledge of its alphabet. Spoken Vietnamese is understood as a ‘register language’ containing a large number of vowels as well as diphthongs and triphthongs in which the meaning of a word can be altered according to a change in vowel pitch or tone. For example, whereas the word *phàm* (with the low falling diacritic above the vowel) is an adjective that means ‘coarse’ or ‘philistine,’ the word *phạm* (with the glottalized falling diacritic underneath the vowel) is a verb that means ‘to offend’ or ‘to contravene.’ In the case of Joyce’s pronunciation of my grandmother’s maiden name, which more precisely is

spelled Phạm, it is understandable that she would not have been able to phonate the word correctly.¹ Even if she had heard the name beforehand, she would not have been able to pronounce it to the degree of accuracy of a native speaker without continuous practice. Therefore, her initial attempt to pronounce the name was not recognized by me as such resulted from my assumption—which was made in the context of my knowing that Joyce did not speak or write Vietnamese—that Joyce was referring to a non-existent proper name “Fem” rather than my grandmother’s name written as “Phạm.” In other words, what made my conversation with Joyce even more uncanny was the fact that after saying my grandmother’s name, she proceeded to use the counterintuitive “Ph” to spell the consonant /f/ sound of the name rather than with the letter “F”; where the use of the letter “F” would have been more instinctive, it would also have been incorrect as it does not exist in the Vietnamese alphabet.²

Incredibly, the above account is only one of many experiences I directly had with Joyce, for whom the extraordinary is an everyday occurrence. Doubtless, a skeptic will contest Joyce’s claim of having a psychic faculty—understood as the ability to intuit knowledge without conscious recourse to thought or reason—and suggest the possibility that she performs through deceptive means. In the case of the preceding narrative of my telephone conversation with her, it is entirely conceivable that Joyce could have learned about my grandmother’s death by hacking my email and discovered my grandmother’s name by accessing online records. From a less incredulous point of view, we could give Joyce the benefit of the doubt and advance a theory that while she was not aware of my grandmother’s death, Joyce’s utterance of the name was not the

¹ According to my understanding, Vietnamese surnames do not designate anything other than patronymic relations, so that the proper name Phạm is considered a homonym of the verb *phạm*.

² Joyce made a similar pronouncement during my subsequent visit. In the middle of a séance that was being conducted in her home, Joyce pointed in my direction and said, “I’m getting something over there by Tony. Does anyone know a ‘Tree’?” After all the other participants shook their heads, Joyce spelled the letters of the name as T-R-U-Y. This name belonged to my grandmother’s older sister who died ten years before. In this case, Joyce both spelled the name correctly as “Truy” and pronounced it correctly as /tri/.

consequence of her being psychic but was the result of a mere coincidence. In the second case, it could be argued that Joyce was familiar with the Vietnamese alphabet, and with knowledge that I was of Vietnamese descent, was able to spell my grandmother's name correctly with a 'ph' instead of an 'f.'

For certain, psychic mediumship has had a history of manipulation by scam artists and charlatans, including several highly publicized cases of fraud occurring in recent years.³ However, in the particular case of Joyce, the possibility that she might in fact possess an ability understood conventionally as 'psychic intuition' cannot be ruled out with absolute certainty. So in contrast to a skeptic's a priori dismissal, this thesis investigates contemporary psychic mediumship by maintaining an openness to the possibility of a supernatural basis for its efficacy. My argument proceeds from that very space of uncertainty and undecidability in which magic can neither be proven nor disproven, through which it can subsequently become actual and real, but only by way of a limited epistemological consideration that operates through the notions of coincidence and contingency.⁴ Furthermore, where the utterance of the psychic coincides with a factual event, the supernatural 'truth' of psychic mediumship may be circumscribed within that coincidental locus insofar as the belief in the supernatural is made possible by the blind spot of skepticism itself.

Contrary to the assumption that the ultimate outcome of a skeptical (or secular) inquiry should result in the demystification of belief, I argue that it is through the most rigorous forms of

³ A notorious example can be found in the case of South Florida psychic Rose Marks, who is set to go on trial in August 2013 for her part in an allegedly scamming her clients out of 25 million dollars. So far, eight of Mark's family members have pled guilty to similar and related charges.

⁴ In contrast to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's statement regarding magic, that "Primitives are undoubtedly prone, as much as, and possibly more than civilized beings, to the fallacy of post hoc, ergo propter hoc," my argument follows the thinking of James Siegel who understands the invocation of witchcraft to explain accident as that which points to the limit of knowledge. Where witchcraft is invoked after the accident, magical events are instead named prior to their occurrence; the perception of an event as magical would not only be post hoc but would also be an instance of a contingency, and in this sense the notion of magic is also that which points to the limit of knowledge.

questioning of magical efficacy that the contingent grounds for belief may be produced. More specifically, following James Siegel's understanding of witchcraft and his re-reading of Marcel Mauss's analysis of magic, we may say that it is where skepticism becomes exhausted and finds its limit that a particular form of rational judgment, the one that has been established by Kant as a priori and synthetic, may be recognized most transparently in its operation.⁵ Following Mauss, Siegel asserts that this form of judgment is distinguished by the fact of its being informed by "prejudicial" social conventions. Correspondingly, I argue for the possibility of judgments pertaining to the efficacy of psychic mediumship operating within a rational domain that maintains their immunity to disproof, insofar as they also informed by the prejudice of belief.⁶

Generally speaking, the anthropological tradition has accounted for magical practices in either one of two ways: in social-evolutionary terms that place it within a hierarchy of human thought—as a primitive mode of rationality operating prior to the development of scientific reason—or comparatively, by making magic intelligible as an analogue of science through cultural relativism. While the latter tradition has succeeded in circumventing ethnocentric bias, I argue that it nevertheless has persisted in foreclosing the figure of the supernatural insofar as its difference is submitted to the violence of appropriation that attempts to contain it within the limits of anthropological reason. In response to this perceived foreclosure, my paper will advance a concept of the supernatural with respect to a theory of language, one that is grounded on the supposition that language is inherently supernatural, or more specifically, that the supernatural constitutes the materiality of language itself. This postulate will in turn be implemented towards both an analysis of magic in general and the practice of psychic

⁵ See James Siegel, *Naming the Witch*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁶ I would further argue that the a priori dismissal of magical efficacy is itself a form of belief insofar that the negation of magical beliefs is merely an expression of a negative belief. At the rational limit, the assertion that "I do not believe in magic" would only amount to saying "I believe that magic does not exist."

mediumship in particular, where question of the mode of reading performed by the psychic, and by coextension, the question of the status of the text that is deciphered by her, will be placed at the at forefront of this inquiry. My hypothesis will also suggest that the concept of the supernatural may not only be positioned as an object of belief that is actualized exclusively by an anthropological other, but as the condition of possibility for all manifestations of language, is also a concept that confronts the limits of anthropological discourse as well.

This thesis seeks to understand the practice of contemporary psychic mediumship in the U.S. through an analysis of ethnographic fieldwork conducted primarily in suburban Detroit. My paper will use the practice of Joyce Gail, a self-professed psychic, as a case study, and will argue for an understanding of psychic mediumship through a theoretical framework grounded on a deconstructive theory of language. In contrast to the formalism of Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and the subsequent structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss' *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, the title of this paper reflects a theoretical disposition towards an anthropological methodology that I would categorize as post-structural, one that is established on the notion of the primacy of language, or more precisely, on the notion of language as *trace*.⁷ Whereas Durkheim's understanding of magic is framed by an evolutionary social-functionalism through which magic becomes a primitive form of religion, for Lévi-Strauss magic and science are "parallel modes of acquiring knowledge."⁸ My thesis will depart from both perspectives and will instead assert that a faithful representation of magical practices—which include divination, spirit possession, magical healing, necromancy, and witchcraft—may be articulated insofar as such an understanding takes into account the possibility of accepting

⁷ For an understanding of the notion of language as trace, see Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 13.

those very beliefs that govern the terms and conditions that those practices operate. These beliefs would be ultimately oriented towards the concept of the supernatural, understood as that which exceeds the laws of nature and which therefore resists being instrumentalized by scientific rationality.⁹

From the perspective of the *transcendentalizability* of the category of the supernatural, I argue that where magical practices are assumed to be based on primitive forms of belief that have been supposedly overcome by modern, rational thought, the practice of psychic mediumship endures as a remnant of those forms. In the case of psychic mediumship, I claim that the practice is a remainder of what Walter Benjamin refers to as “the most ancient” form of reading, one that had historically emerged from what he calls the mimetic faculty and subsequently had become supplanted by a form of reading that favors a logocentric conception of language. Accordingly, my use of the notion of trace is doubled in the sense that the form of reading characterized by psychic mediumship is concerned with an engagement with a particular kind of textuality. In short, I argue that the impossible and paradoxical form of reading of psychic mediumship is a practice that attempts to apprehend and render intelligible the trace structure of language itself.

Although an analysis of psychic mediumship can certainly be made from a sociological standpoint, and while it is not my intention to exclude or deny the validity of such a perspective, this thesis will place its emphasis on the performative aspect of the practice rather than explore the social function that it serves. Furthermore, the absence of an historical analysis of contemporary mediumship where one might demonstrate a relationship between contemporary mediumship and 19th century Spiritualism in my analysis, as well as the omission of a

⁹ The supernatural would therefore be less of a concept than a ‘concept-metaphor’ that may be intuited rather than made into an object of knowledge.

comparison with other similar practices such as those derived from New Age philosophies, or with those of charismatic religions, does not imply that psychic mediumship can be dissociated from its history context. On the contrary, I believe that an investigation into its economic and political effects, as well as the exploration of its significance in popular culture and within our public imagination, should begin with a more radical conceptual framework that can help us to better understand its mode of operation. As a result, my focus will be limited to an intervention into previous anthropological theories of magic and a proposal for an alternative perspective that may facilitate a more complex understanding of the subject.

Necromancing the Exquisite Corpse

In 2005, while I was an MFA student at the California Institute of the Arts, I was invited to participate in the developmental stages of an art project that was conceived by two fellow students named Christian Cummings and Michael Decker. Following a series of successful trials, the project was officially transformed into a performance piece entitled *Spectral Psychographics* and has continued to be performed by Cummings and Decker at art venues throughout the U.S. *Spectral Psychographics* entails the production of drawn images through the use of a Ouija board: after successfully contacting a spirit with the board, the performers ask if he or she would like to produce a drawing; if the spirit agrees, an assistant attaches a felt marker to the planchette (the heart-shaped message indicator) and places a blank piece of paper on top of the board, and the spirit proceeds to produce a drawing. To add to the effect, the entire séance is performed using blindfolds (see Figures 1 and 2).

At CalArts, one of the most intriguing Ouija board sessions occurred after a successful contact with a spirit was made and the conversation turned towards the topic of the school's alleged sublevel basement where Walt Disney's cryogenically frozen body was supposedly stored.¹ Since this myth had been an ongoing joke amongst the students and teachers, we took the opportunity at the séance to inquire about the actual existence of the sublevel and whether or not there was an accessible passage to it. According to the spirit, the sublevel did in fact exist, and while there was indeed a passageway through which it could be accessed, we were told that

¹ CalArts was founded in 1969 through the merger of the Chouinard Art Institute and the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music through the estate of Walt Disney, and a popular urban legend at the school claims that Disney's cryogenically frozen body is stored in a purported sublevel basement on the campus. Due to the institution's architectural resemblance to a hospital—its labyrinthian hallways, windowless classrooms, and numerous doors that appear to remain mysteriously locked—the myth is most likely a modified variant of the more well-known pop culture version in which Disney's cryogenically frozen body is stored underneath the "Pirates of the Caribbean" attraction at the Disneyland theme park.



Figure 1. *Spectral Psychography* live performance by Michael Decker (left) and Christian Cummings (right), 2008. Image courtesy of Christian Cummings.



Figure 2. *Spectral Psychography* drawing, 2009. Image courtesy of Christian Cummings.

the corridor was inaccessibly locked; we would have to be vigilant and “look down,” in the spirit’s words, to find another way to get inside. This recommendation was puzzling since we thought we were already on the ground floor and there was nothing below us that could be observed other than the concrete beneath our feet. After inspecting the locked doors in the vicinity and following several unsuccessful attempts to force them open, we once again turned our attention to the ground and realized that there was an air vent in the main courtyard of the school located not far from where the séance was being held. Unbelievably, we were able to lift the heavy steel grating that covered the opening and another participant named Dewey eased himself down to the bottom of the shaft 10 feet below and made his way across the motionless blades of a huge industrial fan installed at the side of the enclosure. Before our activity could be detected by campus security, Dewey emerged from inside the building out of one of the locked doors nearby.

We quickly entered and went down a stairway into a large, cavernous room and realized with certainty that we had found ourselves in the nethermost section of the campus. The space was a massive industrial mausoleum: it was completely dark, and the floor, ceiling, and walls were entirely made of concrete. Without hesitation the Ouija board was retrieved along with the camera equipment and a flashlight, and Dewey and Michael volunteered to perform the next séance in the sublevel basement. What unfolded was a cathartic climax to an afternoon that was already full of surprises: a spirit claiming to be Walt Disney responded and produced a drawing on the Ouija board that depicted a man with a moustache standing next to an ambulance. In order to understand the significance of the image, we went to a computer station in the library to search for information about Disney and learned that shortly after World War I, a young Disney had been an ambulance driver for the Red Cross in France, and furthermore, we discovered a

photograph of Disney that bore an uncanny resemblance to the one drawn during the séance.²

Besides serving as a more lively counterpoint to my previous narrative in the introductory chapter, I have related this account in order to serve the following four functions: first, to put the development of my interest in psychic mediumship—which originated during the period of my visual art studies where my interest in the concept of intuition and its relationship to the creative process began—into a more personal, historical context; second, to submit it as an example through which we may comprehend psychic mediumship in aesthetic terms, or more specifically, through the model of the surrealist technique of the *Cadavres Exquis* or *Exquisite Corpse*; third, to serve as a more direct example through which a theory of desire can be mapped onto the analysis of psychic mediumship; and fourth, to segue into the narrative of how I met Joyce Gail. Furthermore, both accounts will be compared and contrasted in order to facilitate an analysis that will dissect or deconstruct the model of the *Exquisite Corpse* and demonstrate its condition of being haunted.

By the time of my first interaction with Joyce in the summer of 2011, I had become a student of anthropology and was in the middle of pursuing an entirely different topic of research than that now in question. In June, I had returned from a business trip to provide support for an academic conference in Hong Kong. There I met with Terence, a friend from college, who gave me a tour of the city and the neighborhood where he lived, which was near Temple Street in Kowloon. The area, which has been portrayed in films as a center of the criminal underworld and of prostitution, is famous for its outdoor nighttime flea market, where everything from street food to counterfeit goods can be obtained—one could envisage Walter Benjamin strolling through the dreamworld of Temple Street with an attention to the nightlife sensations that would

² The photograph can be found on the Walt Disney Family Museum website at <http://wdfmuseum.squarespace.com/posts/2010/11/11/veterans-day.html>. Unfortunately, the drawing that was rendered was subsequently lost.

be recognized by him as fragments of what he called the dialectical image. At the north end of Temple Street is an area marked by dozens of stalls occupied by fortune-tellers who cater to both locals and tourists and whose methods of divination range from the use of traditional *Kau Chim* sticks to a modified form of augury that makes use of trained birds to select fortune cards.

As Terence and I walked towards that area, I noticed two women sitting at a nearby table on which an assortment of the tools of their trade was showcased, and as would be expected of any industrious street merchant, I was accosted to approach as soon as we made eye contact. I was surprised, however, when Terence, whom I had always thought to be cynical about such matters, encouraged me to take up their offer for a reading. Not only did he negotiate the terms of the service, which came out to about 10 USD for a face and palm reading, Terence also agreed to act as our mediator and translate the conversation between Cantonese and English.

I felt both apprehension and curiosity as my palm was being studied, and this reaction was intensified due to my being forced to interpret both the women's as well as Terence's physical reactions before their prognostications were eventually given to me in English. After a declaration was made by one of the fortune-tellers, Terence would first react with a smile or a chuckle, leaving me to wonder what was so funny. Was the statement accurate or was it so far from reality that made it laughably absurd? For the most part the answer appeared to be due to the former, for as I recall some of the descriptions about my past and present included the statement that I was a student, as well the fact that I had a history of respiratory problems, both details about which Terence had known since we were undergraduates.

Towards the end of the session, a pair of tourists who turned out to be sisters from Australia passed by the booth and became curious when they observed our amusement. The younger one asked us, "Do you think I should get a reading?" Trying to subdue any enthusiasm

that might make her perceive me as proselytizing, I attempted to reply neutrally by saying, “It was entertaining.” This answer was reassuring enough for the woman to attempt to satisfy her curiosity, so she asked Terence if he would also be willing to provide a translation, and again he agreed. This time, the fortune-tellers’ abilities were much less dramatic. Whereas some of the statements were felt to be correct, such as, “You are a reckless driver, try to slow down,” others were unambiguously wrong. For example, when it was predicted that the client was going to find a new boyfriend, she reacted with irritation and disappointment and reluctantly replied that she was in fact a lesbian. Nevertheless, there was a particular moment near the end of the consultation that was emotionally charged. This occurred when the fortune-tellers expressed concern over what they pronounced as the woman’s history of abusive relationships, to which she reacted by bursting into tears. Afterwards, as we were walking away, I asked Terence what he thought of the experience. He shrugged and replied, “That shit’s crazy man. I don’t know.”

After returning to New York, I discovered that my interest in psychic phenomena had been rekindled due to my interaction with the fortune-tellers in Hong Kong. However, I would characterize my preoccupation with psychics at that particular moment as derived from its entertainment value rather than from an intellectual one since this was transpiring during the academic break, a period which afforded some idle time to pursue more trivial diversions. Furthermore, I might even go so far as to say that the interest had a pragmatic dimension, as it had evolved during a period of time that also found me in the state of melancholy over a lost love object, which is to say that my desire to have another reading was based on a need for consolation. Since I did not know anyone who could give me a personal recommendation, I resorted to what was most readily available and went on the Internet to search for references. Perhaps I should not have been surprised after doing a search on Google using the keyword

phrase “psychics in New York City” when I found reviews of psychic mediums on Yelp, the social networking and user review website that has pervaded digital consumer consciousness.³ It was through Yelp that I met a provider described as “Paul, 3rd Generation Psychic & Medium.” I called the phone number that was listed on the advertisement and met with Paul, who gave me a tarot card reading.

Many of the reviews posted on Yelp described Paul as compassionate and sincere, and my experience with him did not lead me to think otherwise. In terms of his performance he appeared to be forthright, at least to the degree that I could not detect any suggestive forms of questioning that could enable him to create an illusion that he could directly intuit the actual facts of my life history.⁴ I related this impression to a friend, whose fascination was sufficiently aroused to the extent that she decided that she too wanted a consultation from him. Due to scheduling difficulties, Paul was unable to talk to my friend and instead referred her to another psychic named Joyce Gail. This is how I learned of Joyce and how I obtained her phone number. While I was content with the reading I received from Paul and was in no hurry to spend additional money, I was also tempted to see if there would be any similarities or differences between Paul and Joyce’s statements. Since I had received Paul’s referral from my friend, he was not aware that I was about to contact Joyce (that is of course, unless he had some premonition that I would do so), so I felt confident that Joyce would have no prior knowledge of me.

³ The digitalization of psychic mediumship as a commercial service can be put in further perspective. At the moment there are 47 reviewed listings out of a total of 174 on the Yelp website for psychic services within the New York City area. The latter figure is proportionate to the 213 listings in the Yellow Pages telephone directory. In comparison, there are 102 fire stations, 298 Citibank locations, and 480 Starbucks listed in the same directory for the same area. The extent to which the profession has adapted to contemporary marketing techniques is unreserved, and includes not only websites and phone hotlines, but the offering of “Groupons” as well as the auctioning of services on eBay.

⁴ In the magician trade, this tactic is called ‘cold reading’ and is used in an interview situation where the magician employs high probability guesses that would lead him or her to successfully arrive at true determinations, but purely by chance. This is similar to what Joyce describes as the mark of a fraudulent psychic. According to her, you can tell if the psychic is lying if they ask more questions during the reading than give answers.

I gave into curiosity, and August of 2011 I dialed the number. When the phone was answered I was greeted by the gentle and cheerful voice of an elderly woman who introduced herself as Joyce. I expressed my interest in receiving a reading from her, and Joyce consented and offered to schedule a telephone appointment. After informing me that the fee was \$100 for a one-hour consultation, she instructed me to mail a check to her home address in Northville, Michigan, and we set up a time to talk on the following weekend. (Incidentally, my check was cashed a few weeks after the reading, so she accepted my promise to pay on good faith. Later, during the time I spent with Joyce conducting research for this paper, I witnessed several instances where clients did not reimburse her for her time, as well as occasions where she offered her services for free). Joyce also asked me to compile a list of questions that could be answered in a yes/no format. While I felt reassured by her agreeable and sympathetic tone, the pronouncement that the consultation would proceed through a “yes or no” form of questioning was disconcerting since the psychic was in effect giving herself a 50-50 chance of guessing the answers correctly. Little did I know that the experience I was about to have with Joyce would not only defy logic (Boolean or otherwise), but would alter the course of my studies and put into question all of the assumptions that had grounded my understanding of reality.

Although I prepared questions as Joyce had asked, I quickly realized that they were not necessary for her to perform the reading. Without warning, Joyce began the consultation by describing a childhood experience that I considered deeply private and to which I was particularly sensitive. By relating this event to me in the form of a statement and not a question, I understood that Joyce wanted to resolve my doubts by demonstrating that she was not going to employ oblique questioning methods to generate her pronouncements. Since I was neither asked to respond to the statement nor confirm its accuracy, and due to the unexpected way it was

disclosed and the intimate nature of its content, I was completely stunned and remained speechless. It took a moment for me to grasp what had happened, and after a prolonged moment of silence I finally uttered, “That was unbelievable.”

Joyce made a second and equally dramatic prediction concerning the issue of my academic work that left me dumbfounded—a prognostication that doubtlessly has come to be fulfilled. First, in an attempt to deduce my past creative interests, she asked, “Did you work in film?” to which I replied, “Well, sort of. I was previously an art student and I was interested in the incorporation of video in my work.” Next, Joyce proclaimed that I was involved in academics, but she was confused as to what extent. I told her that I was working and studying at the same time, and she replied, “Ok, now that makes sense.” Finally, she asked me what I was studying, and I told her, “I’m getting my master’s degree in anthropology at Columbia University. I’m working on my thesis project on AIDS orphans in Vietnam.” In response to this Joyce declared, “No you’re not. You’re going to write your thesis on psychics.”

One can imagine how incredibly shocked I was upon hearing this loaded prediction, which, as evidenced by this paper, has obviously come to pass. However, I would like to suspend my thoughts on this for a moment and return to the previous account of the Ouija board drawings to discuss how the Surrealist *Exquisite Corpse* technique may help us to understand the logic of psychic mediumship. According to André Breton, the *Exquisite Corpse* was invented in 1925 at 54 Rue du Château, a residence where many of the Parisian avant-garde artists and writers had gathered at the time. The technique was derived from a parlor game called Consequences in which a player wrote on a sheet of paper, folded it to conceal the writing, and passed it on to the next player who in turn repeated the process. For the Surrealists this became a collective method for producing both illustrations and poetry. The name of the technique itself was derived from

the phrase “Le cadaver exquis boira le vin nouveau” (“The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine”) that was created in an initial playing. Strongly influenced by Marx’s critique of capital and Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the Surrealists sought to produce a revolutionary cultural movement with the objective of overthrowing traditional categories of art for the purpose of liberating society from its domination by capitalism. The notion of the unconscious maintained a central position within Surrealist theory, as well as for Breton, its founder and primary thinker. For Breton, Surrealism was based on the belief in the “superior reality” of the unconscious, which stood in contrast to the cold rationality of modernity that underwrites contemporary modes of domination and exploitation. In the *First Manifesto of Surrealism*, Breton defines the movement as “Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”⁵

Setting aside Breton’s dogmatism and the failure of the movement’s revolutionary promise in the wake of its appropriation by what Theodor Adorno would designate as the “culture industry,” Surrealism remains as an indispensable critical resource, and in the case of this particular study, it provides a convenient framework for understanding psychic mediumship. We might think that the practice can be located among those that, according to Breton, have been dismissed “under the flag of civilization” and in “the pretext of progress” as “superstition.”⁶ The particular method of the *Exquisite Corpse* exemplified the Surrealists’ objectives through the fusion of psycho-automatic expression with the principle of collective action. It was for Breton

⁵ André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.

⁶ André Breton, “The Exquisite Corpse, Its Exaltation (1948)” in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Harper & Row: 1992), 189.

an “infallible means of sending the mind’s critical mechanism away on vacation and fully releasing its metaphorical potentialities.”⁷ In the case of *Spectral Psychographics* we can clearly observe the similarities between the operation of Decker and Cumming’s séance performance and formula of the *Exquisite Corpse*. Both may be understood according to the principle of automatism that structures the practice of automatic writing, as well as to the principle of collective action, to produce their respective artifacts. From this I will contend that the content of these artifacts, which are established within an intersubjective matrix of language and desire, are also haunted by their own traces.

From a formal perspective, *Spectral Psychographics* essentially proceeds from the Surrealist tradition. Following the prescriptions of the *Exquisite Corpse*, it effectively produces both outcomes established by the Surrealist technique in the form of its written and graphic artifacts: its writing is achieved through the alphanumeric values provided by the Ouija board and its images are rendered through the use of an augmented planchette as an improvised drawing instrument. The use of blindfolds emphasizes the question of unconscious rendering through its approximation of the constraint imposed in the game of *Exquisite Corpse*, which is the rule that restricts the player’s knowledge of the other’s intention by folding over the paper on which the words or images are jointly produced. However, *Spectral Psychographics* takes the imposition even further through the absolute restriction of visual data and the removal of the expressed content from the artists’ field of knowledge. On the other hand, from a theoretical perspective we may say that *Spectral Psychographics* is an intervention into the Surrealist’s use of automatism insofar as Decker and Cummings are open to the Spiritualist interpretation that

⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

had established the method's original mode of operation.⁸ In contrast to Breton's rejection of Spiritualism, I would argue that the attribution of causality to either the unconscious or to ghosts does not necessarily entail the exclusion of the one from the other. If we speak of the death of the author, either in the sense of Roland Barthes' severing of authority from authorship or in the sense of the author as revenant who speaks from the grave, the question of desire as the force that drives the mode of collective production in both instances is still maintained.⁹

Psychoanalytic theory can provide a framework to help us situate the operation of desire in the context of automatic, collective production, especially since it also provides a perspective through which desire can be related to the notion of the uncanny and to language. In particular, Jacques Lacan's theory of desire, which can be understood through his well-known formula, that "Man's desire is the desire of the Other," is particularly useful in this case. According to Lacan's theorem, desire is always the desire of the Other's desire, which is also to say, the desire to be desired by the other. As a consequence, desire does not maintain a fixed position in the subject because it is always located elsewhere, since the object of the subject's desire—the object that it necessarily lacks—is always founded by the Other, whose desire is precisely that from which the subject has been deprived. Similarly for Freud, the relation between the subject and desire shares a similar disjunction. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* he states: "Thus a dreamer in his relation to his dream-wishes can only be compared to an amalgamation of two separate people who are

⁸ Breton states that, "contrary to what spiritualism proposes—that is the dissociation of the subject's psychological personality—surrealism proposes nothing less than the unification of that personality. It is obvious that, for us, the question of the exteriority of... one's 'voice' could not be posed." In other words, Breton denies the possibility of an external force such as the one operating in spirit possession of animating Surrealist art. However, I would argue that there would be no possibility of the fusion of subject and object without the condition of exteriority in the first place. See "The Automatic Message" in *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), 105.

⁹ Cummings and Decker described the challenges they initially faced in presenting themselves as collaborative authors. Due to the conventions of art exhibiting, curators preferred to ascribed authorship solely to Christian by referring to him as Christian's assistant, by printing his name in smaller font on publicity materials, or by neglecting to mention his name altogether.

linked by some important common element.”¹⁰ In the case of *Spectral Psychographics*, such a conjunction can be said to occur at one level between the pairing of Decker and Cummings, whose relation to one another can be described as that of immediate otherness. We may speak of a medium that links the two artists to one another in same manner as Freud describes in subject’s split in the unconscious, and this common element, as both Freud and Lacan tell us, would be none other than the medium of language. It is through language that the materiality of the dream as well as the artist’s performance (exemplified by their use of the writing board) is constituted, since it is due to the appropriation of the signifier by repression that the cathected sign through which desire pushes for recognition is produced. However, this can only ever be a misrecognition, since as we have already established, desire is always located in the other. In the instance of the art performance, there can never be certainty regarding the origin of the content in the artwork, since the force of its expression is always realized from a ghostly beyond.

The transposition of desire into signification in automatic art also occurs within psychic mediumship. However, despite the similarities there are also differences in the way they operate, since the mode of performance in psychic mediumship is facilitated through commercial exchange. It is in this sense of commerce that psychic mediumship may be considered a service industry profession: where the services of a psychic medium can be auctioned, subject to taxation, and evaluated in the form of a consumer review, it follows that the client’s relationship to the psychic can be framed in economic terms as one of production and consumption.¹¹ In this case, because the commodity that is offered in the form of a consultation is not produced through

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 1955), 579.

¹¹ In recent years the practice of mediumship not only been recognized officially by particular nation-states as forms of religion, as is the case in Haiti. In 2011 the cash-strapped government of Romania recognized witchcraft as a profession in order to withhold taxes on wages earned by practitioners. This occurred during the a same year a scandal involving two self-professed witches accused of blackmailing high-profile public figures in Romania made national headlines. More recently a member of Parliament in Swaziland has proposed a tax hike on “witch-doctors” to help fix the nations’ budget deficit. Considering the current budget crisis in the U.S. it would not be a stretch to speculate that the government is not too far off from institute taxes on this form of work as well.

the logic of capitalist production, that is, since it remains as a form of preindustrial labor, psychic mediumship is comparable to the labor of the artisan, whose means of subsistence are not alienated from him or her. As a result, contemporary psychic mediumship cannot be understood in the framework of what Marx calls commodity fetishism, a concept that refers to the substitution and masking of social relations (the relations of economic production) by objects (i.e. commodities and money). Instead, and strictly speaking, it should be recognized as a *fetish commodity*, that is, as a form of a fetish *as* commodity rather than a fetishized commodity form.

According to Marx, fetishism is an irrational belief that is produced through a desire that invents for itself an illusory source of its satisfaction. In his words, fetishism occurs when “the fantasy of the appetites tricks the fetish worshipper into believing that an ‘inanimate object’ will give up its natural character to satisfy his desires.”¹² From this perspective, Marx might say that a psychic is a fetish object in the sense that her client is like the fetish worshipper who solicits the gratification of their desire, which is primarily the desire for knowledge, through an irrational belief in the psychic’s ability (in this case, that belief is presumably shared by both the psychic and her client). According to the half dozen psychics I have interviewed, the most common questions that are presented to them are usually those regarding the topics of love and money. Where I was allowed to observe readings conducted by Joyce on others, the typical questions came from wives who wanted to know if her husbands were cheating and from unemployed workers who were looking for new job opportunities. The more uncommon inquiries came from clients whose circumstances were more urgent, as in the case of a British father who has been writing to Joyce with the hope that she can help locate his missing daughter. Where the analog of the graphic or text in automatic art is found in the psychic’s spoken pronouncement, in contrast

¹² Karl Marx, “The Leading Article in No. 179 of the *Kölnische Zeitung*,” July 10, 1842, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1842/07/10.htm>

to what Breton might refer to as the “democratic” expression of desire in the art form, the movement of desire in psychic mediumship is asymmetrical, since it is towards the client’s desires that the psychic’s efforts are directed. I will note that this analysis does not stray from Lacan’s formula, since it is in relation to the psychic (as the client’s immediate other) that desire is established. This is made clear in Joyce’s statement that, “A good psychic tells you what you need to hear, rather than what you want to hear,” which is to say that a competent psychic should have knowledge of the client’s true desires, in contrast to what the client thinks they want.

From this perspective, the initial consultation I had with Joyce, and in particular her prediction that the topic of my thesis would be on psychics, was exceptional as it had materialized as a consequence of a triangulation of both of our desires. From my point of view, it effectively meant that this psychic, who had just recently demonstrated to me the effectiveness of her intuition, would now be willing to help with a project that for others might pose the risk of unwanted exposure. The prospect of working with Joyce was also cause for excitement as the new thesis topic she foresaw was closer to my prior interests, and in terms of practical considerations I would have a much easier time collecting data because the research would not require overseas travel. On the other hand, Joyce’s motivations for offering assistance were not immediately clear, and it was not until after several visits to her home and getting to know her that I began to understand Joyce’s reasons for wanting to help me. Among these included her desire to establish legitimacy in the eyes of her family, as well as an intellectual desire to educate and enrich the public’s understanding of her practice. These motivations will be analyzed in greater depth in the next chapter, but for the moment, this basic understanding is sufficient to help us grasp the intersubjective contours of desire that can be actualized in psychic mediumship.

An analysis of the function of desire within the automatism of automatic art and psychic

mediumship is not complete without addressing the notion of the Other that is central to psychoanalytic theory. For Lacan, the Other is not limited to the immediate other which, in the examples I have described, would be constituted by Joyce in her relation to myself, or Decker and Cummings in their relation to each other. This Other is the absolute “big” Other that Lacan equates to the unconscious and to the order of the Symbolic, the concept he coined to describe the dimension of language that consists of signifiers. According to Lacan, a child’s subjectivity emerges when it is “subjected” to language, where its entrance into the domain of the symbolic is conditioned on the splitting of subjectivity into the conscious and unconscious. This split is conditioned by the child’s separation from an Other, produced by way of the missing signifier of the mother’s phallus, which is at the same time the object of the child’s desire as it is forever withheld as a negative inscription and as a primary lack. As a subject, the child’s relation to the Other of the missing signifier is therefore paradoxical, since this Other constitutes its subjectivity (or consciousness) through the establishment of desire by way of language, while at the same time is irredeemably lost to it (in the unconscious). Consequently, the automatic expression of desire is not only generated by the interplay of desires between individual participants but is driven by a desire of an Other that is in perpetual displacement.

The experience of events that could be called supernatural (such as successful acts of divination or séances that appear to effect communication with ghosts) may result in the sensation of anxiety that has been characterized as the feeling of the uncanny. For Freud, the uncanny is the mark of the return of a repressed content that can take the form of the following: forgotten memories that correspond to an individual’s early stage of psychological development, such as those associated with early childhood trauma; the fear of castration; and surmounted modes of thinking, such as the primitive belief in magic. In this manner we might be tempted to

attribute the experience of the uncanny that results from (what is perceived as) supernatural causes to the third example. However, in Lacanian terms, the uncanny is not merely the reemergence of a repressed content in the unconscious, but it is a filling in of the very lack that is constitutive of subjectivity and that makes the phenomenal world legible. In Mladen Dolar's reading of Lacan, he states that "What one loses with anxiety is precisely the loss—the loss that made it possible to deal with a coherent reality. 'Anxiety is the lack of the support of the lack,' says Lacan; the lack lacks, and this brings about the uncanny."¹³ In terms of language, the uncanny can be thought of as the experience of the excess of signification. When the "lack lacks," what takes place is not the signaling of the mere negation of lack, but the discovery of the missing signifier in its excessive fullness. Where the production of language in a séance or in a psychic reading becomes uncanny, it occurs when the signifier rendered by the Ouija board or the medium is transmuted into an impossible form of knowledge. As a result, it is where the signifier is encountered as an excess or where a "something more" is perceived in the process of its production, that the supernatural is made to appear as real.¹⁴

Let us return to Breton once again to see how this psychoanalytic schema will affect our understanding of the automatic mode of expression. In defense against the charge of obscurantism, Breton sought to secure a populist ideal for Surrealism, stating that, "Every man and every woman deserves the personal conviction that they themselves can, by right, have recourse at will to this language which is not in any way supernatural, and is a vehicle, for each and every one of us, of revelation."¹⁵ Again, this resource or vehicle of revelation would be

¹³ Mladen Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night" *October* Vol. 58 (Autumn, 1991), 13.

¹⁴ Lacan's order of the Real is outside of language and therefore external to the order of the Symbolic. Lacan states that, "it is that which resists symbolization absolutely" and is therefore impossible to imagine. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 66.

¹⁵ André Breton, "The Automatic Message" in *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), 106.

specifically located in the method of automatic expression that allows for the suspension of the mind's critical faculty and opening up of the individual to collective consciousness. Breton would continue to argue for its liberatory potential on rational grounds:

Everything I have just said is equally valid on the graphic as on the verbal plane. I may add that, quite incidentally, a major enigma made itself apparent, an enigma posed by the fact of the very frequent encounter of elements deriving from the same sphere in the elaboration by a group of individuals of a single phrase of drawing. This encounter tends not only to set the sometimes extreme discordances jangling nervously but also suggests the possibility of a tacit communication—occurring only in waves—between the participants. This idea of communication should clearly be limited by the known factors governing the calculation of probabilities, but I am confident, nevertheless, that it remains valid.”¹⁶

For even though he admits that the *Exquisite Corpse* demonstrates “the possibility of a tacit communication” and even goes so far as to qualify it as a “major enigma,” albeit “incidental”, Breton nevertheless excludes a supernatural explanation by reducing it to the “known factors governing the calculation of probabilities.” However, as I have argued, it is not the probability but rather the improbable occurrence of that which exceeds chance in the performance of the automatic that triggers the sensation of the uncanny. From another standpoint, if we look at this problem from the perspective of Hegelian semiotics, where the relation of content to form corresponds to the opposition between spirit and body, we could say that the signifier (in its written or spoken form) is like a body, or more precisely, like a corpse. Where expression is automatic—which is to say, where the act of signification is automated, delivered as calculable

¹⁶ André Breton, “The Exquisite Corpse, Its Exaltation (1948)” in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Harper & Row, 1992), 290.

repetition, or produced with a machine-like reactivity—we can say that the words and images produced by this form of expression are haunted by meaning, like a ghost in a machine.

However, the feeling of the uncanny experienced in both psychic mediumship and through the work of art cannot be reduced to calculation or probability, as Breton suggests, since the feeling is produced, as has been explained through Lacanian psychoanalysis, as a result of an oversignification that occurs in the process of communication. And it is precisely through the experience of the uncanny, or more specifically, through its collective reception, that the operation of belief in the performance of automatism becomes most discernible. In both of these instances, where we understand the force of production through the notion of desire, we may also say that the object of desire that ultimately manifests through the shared feeling of the uncanny is none other than the desire for belief. For example, after the drawing of the image of Walt Disney was produced in the *Spectral Psychographics* performance, the statement “I can’t believe what just happened!” made by some of the participants afterwards was analogous to the question “Do you believe it was Walt Disney’s ghost?” asked by others who were in attendance. In other words, what results from the collective shock of the uncanny is the emergence of possibility of belief that becomes something like object of desire, but it is one that can only be displaced onto the other. This is illustrated by Slavoj Žižek, who also takes a Lacanian approach towards belief in his statement, “I think I do not believe, but I believe through the Other.”¹⁷

In the case of psychic mediumship, it was somewhat surprising to observe Joyce’s own experience of the uncanny upon hearing that the predictions she gave to her clients earlier had subsequently come true, which was something I assumed that she would have become accustomed to after all her years of doing this work. Although she generally reacts to these matters by nodding with indifference, Joyce has also demonstrated her capability of being

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1992), 114.

surprised or shocked by the accuracy of her own pronouncements. For example, a woman named Riya related an account to me in which Joyce made the prediction, “There is an important family matter. There is a land dispute,” to her. Riya stated that this was something she “did not understand at that time.” However, two years after receiving the reading from Joyce, Riya became aware that her family was involved in a lawsuit over real estate in China. When she recounted this to Joyce and me, Joyce responded excitedly with eyes widened and said, “Wow. Really? Isn’t that something!” In this example, we see that the psychic is not only not immune to the uncanny, but that the belief she has in her own abilities is made possible through her client’s confirmation of her statements, which in turn has the potential of producing the feeling of the uncanny in herself. For both the medium and the client, we may conclude that the feeling of the uncanny generates the desire to believe, a desire that is circulated through a mutual transference and countertransference.

Reading the Reader

It's late in the afternoon on a Saturday and Joyce is watching television with Ajax, her black French poodle. The television is on as it almost invariably is, and if Joyce isn't replaying episodes of *Ghost Hunters* or *Long Island Medium* that she has recorded on TiVo for me in anticipation of my visit, the channel is instead usually tuned to Animal Planet, which is Ajax's favorite television show. Ajax is sitting up and watches intently and becomes excited after seeing footage of other dogs playing on the screen. From time to time he may let out a growl at a threatening animal, as I observe him do at an image of a snake. Watching Ajax is an amusing way to pass the time, and I wonder if the dog enjoys a more vicarious existence through the television than his owner. Joyce is sitting on her chair nodding in and out of sleep, but is awakened by the dog, who runs to the kitchen door and starts to bark. I follow him and look out the window to see who has pulled into the driveway. Beyond the fence that encloses Joyce's yard I can observe cars whizzing across 8 Mile, the Detroit thoroughfare made famous to the world by the rapper Eminem who starred in the eponymously titled film.

A woman named Stacy and her sister Michelle knock on the door and shake the snow off their shoes as I let them in. Stacy is an African American woman in her 40s who has brought Michelle to receive a psychic reading. As the women take off their coats, I look back nervously to see Joyce walking briskly without the aid of her walker into her bedroom. With her back hunched over and with a slight limp in her step, her movement has the appearance of constant acceleration, as if her legs are continuously trying to catch up with the weight of her bent torso. I am aware that Joyce could easily lose her balance and fall over, as this has occurred once during a previous visit. But Joyce is stubborn and is single-mindedly focused on making

preparations for the reading. She retrieves a small wooden box from the room and unpacks the contents onto the dining room table where the two guests seat themselves.

Stacy introduces Michelle to Joyce, who in turn introduces me to the two sisters. Joyce asks Michelle for permission to let me observe the reading. Michelle agrees, and our attention turns to the items taken from the box, one of which is a small, velvet satchel containing various stones that Joyce has collected over the years. Joyce holds up a piece of white coral and says that it was given to her by a Native American shaman whom she met during a trip to New Mexico in the 80s. She instructs Michelle to pick up the stones and “give them a good toss” onto the green hand towel that had just been laid out on the table. Michelle scoops them into her hands and releases them as a person would with a pair of dice. As Joyce studies the position of the stones, she explains to us her preference for using “natural” materials to perform readings rather than tarot cards. “Tarot cards are plastic and porous,” she says. “You don’t know who you’re reading for because they absorb the vibrations of the people who come into contact with them. Natural materials like sand, water, smoke, or fire don’t do this.”

Joyce then turns to Michelle and asks, “Now what part of your life would you like to gain insight?” Michelle professes that she is preoccupied with her love life, so Joyce ponders the stones for a moment and then asks, “Are you married?” Michelle answers that she is indeed married and asks Joyce if she thinks her husband is cheating on her. Joyce thinks again for another moment and hesitantly replies, “Yes, I think he is.” Upon hearing this, Stacy grunts and rolls her eyes in disdain. I anticipate that Michelle will react with at least an equal amount of emotion, but to my surprise she doesn’t appear to be affected. Next, Joyce looks down at the stones and asks, “Are you dating anyone else?” The sisters both look at one another and chuckle, and Michelle answers with the look of someone who has just been caught red-handed, “Yes I

am.” Joyce declares, “This man is also married!” Michelle shakes her head and giggles, and Stacy, who is clearly relishing in the promiscuous narrative that Joyce is unraveling lets out, “Oh what!” Joyce maintains her composure and says to Michelle, “You need this to end this. This man isn’t good for you. He just goes from woman to woman. All he cares about is humpin’ and bumpin’!” Upon hearing this, we all burst out in hysterical laughter.

The reading is interrupted when the phone rings, and I offer to pick it up for Joyce. On the other end of the line is a man named Robert, a contractor from Long Island, New York, who had allowed me to observe a reading done for him by Joyce over speakerphone during a previous visit. Robert is in the middle of a divorce and has been receiving advice from Joyce on how to deal with his wife, and has also been soliciting her opinions concerning a real estate investment. I inform him that Joyce is in the middle of conducting a reading for another client and return to the dining room after hanging up. The tone of the discussion has now become more serious, and Joyce now begins to inquire about Michelle’s children. She asks, “How many daughters do you have? Your eldest daughter, is she pregnant?” Michelle’s eyes widen as she confirms that her oldest child is in fact a woman and is indeed pregnant, and states, “Nobody knows about this yet. She’s only been pregnant for a month.” Joyce expresses her concern that the daughter’s boyfriend is “the kind of person who is always up to no good.” She urges Michelle to convince her daughter, who is currently in nursing school, to leave the boyfriend move back in with her mother. The reading continues for another few minutes with some discussion about Michelle’s other children, as well as her future employment prospects. At the end of the reading, Michelle pays Joyce and the two sisters bid their farewell and leave.

The previous account is a typical example of a psychic reading performed by Joyce Gail, a 78-year-old widow and a retired social worker from Northville, Michigan. Joyce is the mother

of eight children; her first five children are all sons whom she had with her first husband. She gave birth to a sixth son with her second husband, and adopted two more children, a daughter and a mentally handicapped son, with her third and most recent husband. Joyce has eleven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren by extension, and since the early 70s, she has cared for at least 100 foster children. When I took a brief trip to Detroit in December 2011 to meet Joyce for the first time, I did not know any of these details about her and was rather nervous about staying in the home of an individual with whom I had only had contact over the phone, and who, moreover, made claims about possessing abilities that may be considered preposterous to some. Not knowing what to expect, upon entering Joyce's house for the first time, my attention was initially drawn to the photos that were displayed throughout her living room. I felt partially reassured when Joyce began to describe her family through the photos, which indicated that her invitation to host me in her home was consistent with her sense of maternal hospitality.

My first impression of Joyce recalled the Rachel Cooper character played by Lillian Gish in the southern gothic film *The Night of the Hunter*.¹ In the film, Cooper is a tough, old woman who cares for orphans and saves the two child protagonists from being apprehended by the Reverend Harry Powell, the serial killer played by Robert Mitchum. This impression persisted, and the more time I spent with Joyce the more she became something like a surrogate grandmother to me. This may have been detectable to others as well, because during a subsequent visit, I took Joyce to Meijer (a regional hypermarket chain) to buy groceries, and without a semblance of irony, the man working at the cash register asked, "Is she your grandma?" Incidentally, Joyce and I do not share the slightest physical resemblance as she is Caucasian and I am Vietnamese.

¹ See Charles Laughton, director, *The Night of the Hunter* (United Artists, 1955).

Despite her warmth and generosity, it took some time for me to get accustomed to Joyce's matter-of-fact way of speaking about the paranormal. As indicated in the account about my grandmother's passing, Joyce's sensitivity to the presence of spirits is one aspect of her special intuitive power. Although she does not refer to herself as a spiritualist—she withholds that title for mediums who communicate with ghosts exclusively—Joyce has experience in conducting séances and invites her friends to her home to perform them on occasion. But in terms of her more common performances of psychic readings, the messages that she relates to her clients are frequently received from a ghostly source. After dinner, Joyce gave me an account of the typical poltergeist-like phenomena that occur in her house, and presented some of the devices she uses to manage these occurrences. For example, she pointed out a photograph of her late husband Johnny, who passed away in 2006, and to her best friend Phyllis, who died in 2010. Next, she nodded her head in the direction of the two wind chimes hanging inside her kitchen, which were of different lengths and rung with separate tones. According to Joyce, every now and then the wind chimes would ring without any explanation. I was quite taken aback when she said this to me and incredulously asked, “You mean since that since they are inside the house they can't be blown by the wind? And you're saying that they can ring on their own?”

Joyce replied, “That's exactly what I'm saying. I'll be sitting here (in the living room) and all of a sudden one of them will start ringing, and I can tell which one is ringing by the sound. And when this happens, depending if it's the big one or small one, I know that either Phyllis or Johnny have come to the house to pay me a visit.”

For hours I listened to Joyce talk about other fascinating occurrences that she has experienced in her home and throughout her life. She also revealed to me her theories and beliefs on everything psychic, from the phenomena of indigo children to past life regression to the work

of Ruth Montgomery.² As our first visit progressed that weekend, I began to form a second impression of Joyce, likening her to a second, yet very different and even more iconic film character. While Joyce was talking I began to scrutinize the short, dark haired woman sitting in front of me. There was something about her round figure and her large, wide-rimmed glasses that made me think of someone else. And then it hit me. In addition to the protective and nurturing grandmother figure in *The Night of the Hunter*, Joyce also reminded me of Tangina Barrons, the spirit medium played by Zelda Rubenstein in Steven Spielberg's *Poltergeist* film trilogy.

Joyce grew up with a younger sister in a white, middle class family with a Christian upbringing, and has lived in Michigan for most of her life. As a child she was often punished for having the “wrong” kind of friends. She states that, “I used to bring home all kinds of people. I would make friends with people who had disabilities, who lived on the wrong side of tracks, or were of a different color. I wanted to be friends with kids who were different, and this got me into a lot trouble.” Joyce has carried this disposition with her throughout her life, as evidenced by her lifelong friendship with Phyllis, who was African American, and through her adoption of a mentally handicapped child. I have also discerned this liberal attitude in through our lengthy discussions; for example, through the high regard she has for her new Muslim neighbors (Michigan has a large, growing population of Arab Muslims), and in her open support of gay marriage. I believe this disposition is based less on a political tendency than as a result of her psychic intuition, which has increased her sympathy towards marginal individuals. On the one hand, she claims to be able to ‘empathically’ feel both the emotional and physical states of others, particularly when they are in a state of distress. On the other hand this same ability, which

² The term “indigo children” is a New Age concept that was coined by a self-professed psychic named Nancy Ann Tappe in the 1970s. The term is used to describe, according to her, the many children who she observed that were being born with indigo colored auras. For Tappe this is an indication that a new generation of people with paranormal abilities is emerging. Ruth Montgomery is a self-described psychic and protégé of Arthur Ford who has written extensively on the subject and has a great deal of influence on New Age thought.

she often refers to as “a curse,” had also produced a sense of alienation that was experienced throughout her childhood and into her early adult life. According to Joyce, this was the result of her inability to understand and to accept the fact of being a psychic, but as she learned to embrace her psychic faculty, she also maintained a sympathetic disposition towards other socially excluded individuals.

I can at least confirm her ability to feel the physical pain of others. On several occasions I have observed Joyce complain about having pain in a certain part of her body and then approach a complete stranger, including a waitress at a restaurant where we were having dinner and a hairdresser when I took her to the salon, who both confirmed that there were indeed suffering from a health condition in those same areas. I have also had this experience with Joyce myself. During my third visit to Northville, in November of 2012, Joyce introduced me to Margaret, a fellow church member (Joyce is a member of the Unity Church, which is a non-denominational, Christian based organization) and practicing Reiki healer, who came to Joyce’s house and agreed to perform Reiki on me.³ As Margaret was meditating behind me with her hands on my shoulders, the temperature in Joyce’s living room seemed to rise and I began to feel light-headed. Margaret and Joyce both claimed to experience the same sensations as well. Joyce was sitting in front of me with her eyes closed as if in meditation. Then, while rubbing her lower back, she looked up at me and with a grimace said, “Tony, are you experiencing pain in your back?” Interestingly, I had completed chiropractic treatments for a sprain in my lower back six months prior—a fact that I had not previously disclosed to either Joyce or Margaret—and I had been free of pain until right before the moment that Joyce posited her question. Feeling simultaneously

³ Reiki is spiritual practice and a form of alternative medicine founded in that uses a technique commonly called “palm healing.” It is claimed to have been discovered through mystical revelation by Mikao Usui whilst performing *Isyu Guo*, a twenty-one day Buddhist training course held on Mount Kurama, in 1922.

surprised at the return of the pain as well as to Joyce's reaction, I replied, "Yes." Joyce nodded her head in affirmation, and at the same time, Margaret excitedly exclaimed, "Wow!"

Joyce recalls having her first psychic experience when she was five or six years old. It occurred during her uncle's return from Naval Station Great Lakes in Illinois, where he was on leave after a tour of active duty. Joyce was ecstatic upon his arrival, recalling that when he entered the house, she ran to him with her arms open wide. Embracing him she exclaimed, "Hi Uncle Rudy! Now that you're back, is Aunt Eleanor going to go back to sleeping with you or is she going to keep sleeping with Eddie?" At that age Joyce did not yet understand what the colloquial 'sleeping with someone' meant, nor did she ever actually witness Aunt Eleanor sleeping, either figuratively or literally, with someone named Eddie, a person whom she claims she had never met. The family was understandably shocked when they heard this, and Joyce's father was especially furious. "He gave me a good whooping," says Joyce, for what she thought was an innocent remark. Joyce didn't know why she uttered those words. According to her, they just popped in her mind and she had simply blurted them out. It turned out that Aunt Eleanor was indeed having an affair with a man named Eddie, and even though Uncle Rudy and his wife stayed married, he never forgave her for cheating on him.

It wasn't until much later in her life that Joyce was able to move beyond the trauma of that experience and come to terms with her abilities. The turning point occurred in the late 60s when Joyce was in her 30s. Having divorced her first husband due to domestic violence, and while living as a single mother of six after the abrupt departure of her second husband, who had another family in Germany as she later discovered, Joyce enrolled part-time as an undergraduate

at the University of Michigan with her friend Phyllis.⁴ Keeping in mind that the New Age movement had not yet entered mainstream culture and the phrase ‘psychic medium’ had not yet become a part of popular vernacular, at this time Joyce understood that activities linked to the occult could only have negative moral connotations, and it took many years and many more confusing and painful experiences before Joyce could begin to come to terms with her unique abilities. She related to me an incident that occurred during a psychology class:

We were sitting down and I looked up and the professor was writing on the board on the stage. There were two or three hundred students, and they break up into sections, you know? Well anyway, I’m sitting there and all at once it looked like smoke—it’s the only way I can explain it—starting from the ground up on the platform, and then all at once I’m looking and taking my glasses off, blinking my eyes. Phyllis is sitting next to me and says, “What’s wrong with you?” I said nothing, but it got worse: I could see more of the man. Phyllis again asks, “Joyce, what’s wrong with you?”

I said, “Phyllis, there’s a man up there on the stage and I can see right straight through his body to the blackboard.”

Phyllis screams, “What?” Of course all those people turned around and looked, you know, so we waited until the break and I walked to the professor.

I said, “Help me.”

The professor replies, “Well, right after class is over.” So we went up (at the end of the class) and he says, “Okay, now what part of the lesson didn’t you understand?”

I said, “No, I think I’m going crazy.”

He said, “You better come to my office.”

⁴ It may be surprising to learn of the difficulties that Joyce faced in her previous marriages considering her demonstrated ability to diagnose relationships. However, according to Joyce, psychics cannot perform divinations on themselves, which accounts for her failure to avoid those negative outcomes.

So Phyllis and I go to his office, and I was getting so upset. I was crying. I was nervous, and I said, "Phyllis, I'm afraid."

And she says, "Let's see what he says first. Let's not get afraid until we know what he says."

I said, "Okay."

So the professor asks, "So what seems to be the problem?"

And I go, "I saw a man standing next to you on the stage while you were giving your lecture."

So the professor says, "Would you describe that man to me?"

I said, "Yes, he had a grey and white pinstriped suit, he had wild salt and pepper hair and a wild beard that looked like it was cut off with hedge sheers. And he had a cane, and the handle of that cane was an elephant." And then I thought to myself, "Why did I say that? I don't know where it came from."

And he said, "That's interesting. That's my father. We buried him with that cane." He said, "You stay right here." So he went out of the room and by this time I am a mess. I am literally hysterical. Here I've got six little boys that I got to raise. Then he came back, and I'll never forget this, he said, "We're sending you to the Carolinas."

Now in Ann Arbor there were two Ypsies: if you were in mental health it was Ypsilanti State Hospital and if you were in education it was in Eastern Michigan (University). So I said, "So I can't go to Ypsi?" I'm thinking mental hospital, he's thinking academically.

He said, "Oh no, they don't have a program that's good enough for you."

Oh! I didn't hear anything after that, Tony. I thought, "I'm so bad I can't even go to the mental hospital." And I was crying. I was trembling. He should have asked me, "Why are you

upset?” but he didn’t. So I said, “I won’t go without Phyllis” because I had this terrible idea I would go down there and they would lock me away.

And so then we’re down there. We go in this room, and they did what you’re doing. They were taking details, you know, asked me questions, how old I was... They never asked questions of health, they asked if there was any mental illness in the family, and that just revved me all over again to think now I had hereditary mental illness. So they put me in this room, and I think there were 13 researchers, and Phyllis sat in the corner where I could see her, and they took these cards and flipped them down and said, “Now what’s under that card.”

I said, “I don’t know. Turn it over and find out!” And everything they were asking, they are assuming I know why I’m down there. I don’t know why I’m down there. I think I’m going down to prove I’m going to be crazy and get locked away somewhere. And so they did an EEG, and the woman said, “She has an epileptiform of the brain.” Now, oh my god, I’m not only mentally ill, I’m also an epileptic now. You can imagine emotionally what it was doing to me. I didn’t have that much education at that time. I didn’t know anything about the subject, so I was so upset, I’ll never forget. So she said, “You stay right here.”

They went up and one man came in. I’ll never forget this man: short little guy bald on the top. And he says, “What is your impression of me?”

I thought, I’m supposed to be crazy, he’s crazy too! Why’s he asking that? And Phyllis said it was then that she knew what was going on. She said my face changed, my voice changed, and I said (lowering her voice), “Do you really want my impression?”

And Phyllis went, “Oh!” She knew what was coming. I didn’t know I did this. I thought when I did stuff like that it was advice.

And he said, “Yes.”

I said, "You know the other man? Why don't you stop screwing his wife so he can get his life together?"

And he went flying out of the room and Phyllis said "Oh no!"

They came back in and...the little short man: head down. And the man whose wife he was messing with? That man was Turkey red. He was furious! Here they had been watching me behind, you know, the two-way glass. They heard everything that happened.

She said, "It is the opinion of this committee with an 80-95% accuracy rate that you are a legitimate psychic."

Psychic? I don't know what they're talking about. And then I said (to myself), "Psychic, like psycho... I can figure this out I used to have Latin: psycho, psychopath... oh my god. Psychiatry? Oh my god!"

I'm really getting worked up now, and they said, "No, you see things in the future."

I stopped and said, "A goddamned fortune teller?" And I got up and went running out crying. They're following me. They pulled me back. I don't know who it was. It must have been a doctor because somebody gave me an injection and when I came to I was in the room where they had me rest before.

And Phyllis was there with me she just took her arm and pushed me down and said, "Wait, you're gonna listen to me before you do anything." They had taken Phyllis aside and told her and explained it and she said, "Joyce all they're telling you is that you have the ability to see things for people. You're not any witch. You're not crazy."

I said, "I know that but I don't want that."

She said, “Joyce you’ve got it, because they say if you don’t study this and find out what it is, you will go crazy. You’ll start hearing voices. You’ll see things that people can’t see. You’ll hear things that people can’t hear.”

It was shortly after this that I began to accept my psychic (ability) and not be ashamed of who I was.

The place where Joyce had been sent “down there” in the Carolinas was the Institute of Parapsychology, formerly known as the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University, which was founded in 1930 by Joseph Rhine.⁵ Rhine had been a graduate student of botany at the University of Chicago when he developed an interest in parapsychology—a term he introduced with psychologist William McDougal—after attending a lecture in May 1922 by Arthur Conan Doyle about the scientific proof of the communication with the dead. The Laboratory began to operate autonomously from Duke University in 1965 by the time Joyce had arrived there to become a test subject, and is known today as the Rhine Research Center. The Center continues to publish scholarly articles in a periodical called *The Journal of Parapsychology*, which was founded by Rhine in 1937. After an extensive search, I could not find any descriptions from data published in the journal that could be connected to Joyce’s profile. A search at the Duke University archives of Joseph Rhine’s correspondences was also conducted, but no evidence of Joyce’s visit could be confirmed. I also spoke with Dr. Sally Rhine Feather, the daughter of Joseph Rhine and the director of the laboratory during the time that Joyce claims to have visited, who could not confirm Joyce’s account either. According to Dr. Feather, considering that the experiments were conducted anonymously, and due to the sheer number of people who were

⁵ Research at the Parapsychology Laboratory was initially aimed at the study of extrasensory perception and psychokinesis. As a result of laboratory’s founding, Duke University became the second academic institution in the United States to engage in such a field of study, following the institution of a similar laboratory at Stanford University in 1911.

invited to participate in any period of time, it is almost impossible to determine if scientific conclusions were made concerning particular individuals.⁶

Joyce's visit to Duke University marks a turning point in her life, not only in terms of her discovery of the concept of a 'psychic medium' but also her acceptance of it as an identity that would allow her to leave behind the burden of guilt and shame she had so often felt. It also appears to indicate a positive turn in her personal life and the opening of her social life to new possibilities. She began to perform formal psychic readings shortly afterward the visit, and perhaps as a consequence of her self-acceptance, she finally met her third husband Johnny, who she describes as "the love of my life":

At this point we were living in Ann Arbor and I was commuting to Detroit, where I was working as a medical education coordinator as a single mom, and my only recreation was church and going to the YMCA for singles dancing. And this one night I came home and I was exceptionally tired. I called this friend of mine, her name was Joyce too, and I said, "I don't think I'm going to the dance, I'm just too tired."

She says, "Ok," and hung up.

Then I asked my oldest son, Dan, "Will you serve your brothers dinner?" because I had already made the dinner the night before.

And Dan said, "Yeah Mom, I'll take care of it and take care of the boys."

⁶ As fantastic as her story may sound, I have no reason to doubt Joyce's claims. Besides the many unexplainable experiences I have personally had with her, I have also interviewed several well-informed and educated individuals who can attest to the honesty and integrity of Joyce's character. Among these include Michael Kan, former Interim Director of the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum and curator, and Brett Seabury, Emeritus Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Michigan, both of whom have known Joyce for many decades. It is worth noting that Joyce has also contributed her psychic gifts towards the expansion of knowledge in a different higher education setting, as Professor Seabury, who was one of Joyce's graduate school instructors, admits to having invited her to speak in his classes about the use of psychic intuition in the context of providing social service. Furthermore, the existence of Joyce's scientific contribution as a test subject remains possible, since most of the reports in the *Journal of Parapsychology* involve the use of statistical measurements culled from data obtained from the experimental groups. In the case where individuals were identified, this was always done with the use of aliases. However, it should also be noted that, according to Dr. Feather, the Rhine has never conducted brain scans on any of its research subjects.

So I went in the bedroom and laid down and I heard a voice say, "Joyce. Joyce." My sons never called me Joyce, but I didn't think of it at the time. So at any rate I laid back down and I heard a male voice say, "Get off your ass and go to the dance!" And I thought the kids were playing and looked out and they were eating dinner. So I went back to bed again and laid down, and I got a very uneasy feeling that I had to go.

So I called my friend Joyce back and said, "Listen. I'll go to the Y in Redford."

And she said, "I wish you'd make up your mind."

I said, "Well I can't explain it to you now. I'll tell you all about it as we go down to the dance."

She said, "I'll have my boyfriend take us."

Now we had a rule, you should put this down Tony, we were single women and we made a rule not to go out with strange men and to stay together. We got down there and, my gosh! There were three women for every man! The thing about me was I was always a good dancer and the guys liked dancing with me. Well, fifteen to twenty minutes after we were there I realized it was a lost cause.

Now, the women were lined out so the men could come up and ask them to dance, and my back was against the wall. There were two rows of women in front of me. But this man put his hand into the crowd and I automatically grabbed it. And we started dancing. We danced the entire night. He asked where I lived. I said, "Ann Arbor," which was thirty-some miles away. Anyway he brought me home, the next day we had breakfast, and it was a whirlwind after that.

Where the idea of a singles dance at the YMCA seems so antiquated in comparison to the contemporary online dating rituals that have now become the norm of courtship, Joyce and Johnny's discovery of each other, which is marked by the image of a single hand plunging into a

crowd of women as if in search of a needle in a haystack, is made even more endearing in this context. It is also especially hard for me to avoid being sentimental in this particular case when I picture Joyce in a fully mobile body, lighting up the dance floor, her moves inspiring both envy and admiration. For Joyce today, this form of expression is impossible, not so much because of her age, but rather due to the accumulation of physical trauma inflicted on her over a lifetime of accidents and diseases that have rendered her practically immobile.

However, the point of her story is not to wax nostalgic. Joyce's suggestion that I "should put this down" reflects her wish to both communicate and emphasize the exceptional circumstances through which her first encounter with Johnny had taken place. The idea of Johnny's hand coming from nowhere is not unlike the mysterious voice that exclaimed, "Get off your ass!" which Joyce had also grabbed on to in a metaphorical sense. This voice, whether it came from an external entity or whether it originated from within Joyce's own mind, was nevertheless something that she heeded and that compelled her to make a decision. It was also a voice that went against another that is considered more intelligible or recognizable, since it finds expression in the domain of consciousness. This other voice might be understood as the voice of reason, which can be referred to colloquially as common sense. Against the latter, which would have compelled Joyce to stay at home because she was tired, to leave the dance due to the small odds of finding a dance partner, and to observe her rule of not going home with strangers, it was ultimately the voice of intuition that prevailed and led Joyce to her chance meeting.

Here we might ask: is this intuitive voice not unlike the automatic voice of desiring the unconscious discussed in the previous chapter, the one that operates both in the artwork as well as in the performance of psychic mediumship? Would it not constitute an instance of split subjectivity as theorized by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where the 'common sense'

voice of the superego (operating at the level of consciousness) would be placed against the intuitive, desiring id of the unconscious? However, we are also once again confronted with the possibility that this ghostly figure cannot be entirely reduced to the unconscious, so that the interpretation that the spectral voice that gave Joyce the command to act belonged to an *actual* ghost remains suspended. As in the case of *Spectral Psychographics* where a conjured voice commands the artists to “Look down,” this other voice that Joyce hears produces the possibility of a supernatural explanation that once again offers itself as an object of desire and belief.

Where the notion of psychic intuition is the sole concern, Joyce’s narrative situates the decision inspired by presentiment as working in opposition to reason or common sense, so that it entails a wagering or speculation on an outcome that looks above and beyond the calculation of risk. To look at this operation more closely, we can turn to an example in which it can be recognized in its simplest form: a gamble. For Walter Benjamin, the pleasure found in gambling is not obtained in the result of winning per se. Opposing the sensation of what he calls unconscious, physical “motor innervations” against “optical or rational consciousness,” it is through the former that the winner achieves a “highly remarkable feeling of elation, of being rewarded by fate, of having seized control of destiny.”⁷ In this schema, it is not the question of attempting to discern the ontological location of a knowledge perceived beforehand, but of the engagement with a “correct physical predisposition” with fate itself that is the key to successful divination. Consequently, we might think of the choices made by Joyce that led up to her encounter with Johnny as a series of intuitive gambling moves that overcame her rational

⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Notes on a Theory of Gambling” in *Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Harvard University Press, 1999), 297-298.

consciousness and that led her to win, so to speak, her romantic fate.⁸ Of course other factors such as loneliness or the need to go out dancing might have also been at play, but this does not discount Joyce's belief that her chance meeting was effectuated through her own clairvoyance as well as through the intervention of an otherworldly force.

The point of congruency between Benjamin's theory of gambling and Breton's concept of automatic expression is located in the province of the unconscious. For both thinkers, the formulation of an aesthetic grounded on an unconscious mode of perception is conceivable in a system where difference is bounded by immanence. Thus the (dialectical) contradiction between innervation and fate in gambling and the internal/external voice in automatic writing find their resolution on the immanent plane. Of course, there is an historical affinity between Benjamin and Breton, as they were contemporaries who moved in the same intellectual circles in Paris, and it was Benjamin's encounter with Surrealism that led to the inspiration of his esoteric concept of the "dialectical image," which he figured as the "dream image" of an archaic, "utopian trace" bursting forth from the ruins of industrial capitalism.⁹ Looking closer at this Benjaminian concept from the perspective of his theory of gambling may help to illuminate our understanding of psychic mediumship. On gambling he further states:

The proscription of gambling could have its deepest roots in the fact that a natural gift of humanity, one which, directed toward the highest objects, elevates the human being beyond himself, only drags him down when applied to one of the meanest objects:

⁸ Interestingly, Benjamin compares the happiness of the winner to "the expression of love by a woman who has been truly satisfied by a man." See "Notes on a Theory of Gambling" in *Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Harvard University Press, 1999), 298.

⁹ See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland, and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1999)

money. The gift in question is presence of mind. Its highest manifestation is the reading that in each case is divinatory.¹⁰

Where he has elsewhere referred to divinatory reading in the context of the mimetic faculty, in this instance the “natural gift of humanity” takes the form of “presence of mind,” a notion that can be assumed to be analogous to the idea of “motor innervation.”¹¹ Furthermore, the figure of the primitive recurs throughout Benjamin’s oeuvre and is alluded to in this instance when we recall in that same essay on mimesis his claim that divination is reading in its “most ancient form.” It is also implied in the concept of the dialectal image, understood as the semblance or trace of a utopian, Ur-historical, messianic era, towards which it would be the historian’s task to grasp. According to Benjamin, this would be facilitated precisely through a presence of mind that would form a constellation of the historical past with the present. This in turn would constitute the proper use of the faculty, which is for the purpose of elevating humanity beyond itself; correspondingly, its ethical application would also contravene its debasement, that is when “applied to one of the meanest objects,” namely money. Where Benjamin speaks of the use of divination for profit, he is not only referring to gambling in its form as leisure and entertainment, but also and more importantly to the form of speculation that drives the modern stock market. In both cases, what Benjamin might be suggesting is a dialectal opposition between the instrumentalized use of divination in the service of the money-form and its application towards the production of meaning.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 513.

¹¹ The assumption is derived from Benjamin’s statement that “gambling generates by way of experiment the lightning-quick process of stimulation at the moment of danger, the marginal case in which presence of mind becomes divination.” Here, “lightning-quick process of stimulation” is understood as what Benjamin expresses earlier as “motor innervation.” See “Notes on a Theory of Gambling” in *Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Harvard University Press, 1999), 298.

As I got to know Joyce, I began to understand her motivations for offering to help me. Although her ambitions are not explicitly Marxist (like Benjamin's), that her political views are left leaning and that she is a supporter of labor rights does not come as a surprise considering the fact that Michigan, the state in which she has lived most of her life, has been a traditional stronghold of the UAW. However, from the perspective of her own intellectual interests, Joyce's beliefs are no less utopian. From the time of our first telephone conversation she has repeatedly asserted to me, "Tony you are also psychic." This was unnerving to hear initially, as I was unsure whether or not it was a line that Joyce used to manipulate her customers into believing in her. She has also stated to me that "Everyone is psychic," and at first I also likewise suspected that this was a way for her to convince *herself* of her abilities, by default. Additionally, I was also concerned that Joyce had another ulterior motive, which was to use my project as a way to promote herself.

My apprehension was relieved after getting to know Joyce and observing the way she conducts her work. Joyce performs most of her readings at home over the phone, and in the time I have spent with her there, I have observed her give most of these readings for free. This is primarily because the majority of the people who call are friends or longtime clients, but I have also seen her offer her services free of charge to complete strangers, especially to those who she feels are in need of help, and always to those who she feels are in danger or life-threatening situations. It should be noted that Joyce has been conducting her practice in this way while dealing with her own financial difficulties. Like so many others since the 2008 housing bubble, these mostly pertain to her struggle to save her home from foreclosure.

Joyce sees the application of her ability through an ethical lens that is based on her own economic beliefs, and like Benjamin, she asserts that psychic intuition should be used to help

others rather than for monetary gain. Her acceptance of her abilities following her visit to Duke University opened new possibilities in her social life. Joyce started off by conducting readings simply for fun, and afterwards began receiving referrals to all kinds of people, including businessmen and celebrities. She would even be asked to travel to New York to perform at parties where she would be exposed to the wealthy establishment, meeting everyone from filmmakers and supermodels to bankers and socialites. Despite her diverse clientele, she refuses to charge her wealthy clients at a higher rate, and turns away those who she feels are “psychic addicts,” knowing well that it is this type of patron that can provide her with the more steady source of revenue. Joyce often warns me of the danger that greed poses to the psychic, claiming that she has known others who have lost their ability due to their fixation with making money. As a result, she turns down people “who only want to be told what they want to hear, rather than what they need to hear,” despite their eagerness to pay. In her words, “If they don’t want to know the truth then I don’t bother reading for them.”¹²

Although Joyce did not state this categorically, it would not be incorrect to interpret her mantra that “You should give back to the universe” as her golden rule of psychic mediumship. This imperative would preface those previous economic convictions as well as another tenet that Joyce often emphasizes, one that is practically identical with Benjamin’s. Where Joyce believes that psychics should avoid the allure of monetary gain, she likewise asserts that those who seek the services of psychics cannot do so with the intent of making profit, since both of these uses

¹² There are exceptions, however. Joyce will withhold information from a client if she thinks it is better that they not know the something she intuits, for example, if she knows when someone is going to die.

would amount to the corruption of the psychic faculty. As a result, Joyce also refuses to give readings to customers who seek knowledge pertaining to both gambling and the stock market.¹³

As our relationship developed I eventually became comfortable enough with Joyce to ask why she agreed to help me. Joyce's answer was that she saw this project as an opportunity to educate others and to raise awareness about this psychic capacity, which she claims is inherent in all of us. In her view, the more we are enlightened to this aspect of our nature, the more empathetic and humane our society will become. Idealistic as this may sound, Joyce also has a more immediate expectation regarding the outcome of this project that pertains to her family relations: that it might help legitimize her in the eyes of certain relatives who see her as a source of embarrassment. I was surprised to learn that she had been spurned by a good number of family members, not only because of the difficulty of conceiving that anyone could harbor derision towards someone as compassionate as Joyce seems to be, but especially since one would assume that those who have known Joyce the longest must also have experienced some of the strange phenomena that I have encountered myself. But according to Joyce, these individuals are dismissive of their experiences and more concerned with the perception of others, particularly those who disparage her psychic beliefs as being absurd or morally wrong.

Perhaps the biggest question concerning Joyce is the problem of knowing how she is able to do what she does. For even if we take Benjamin's idea of the presence of mind and Joyce's claim that "everyone is psychic" as givens, the question remains: what about Joyce makes her apparently more psychic than others? It seems that Joyce has never been able to figure out how to answer this question herself, which is perhaps another reason why she supported this project.

¹³ While she is strict in terms of following the prescription of not to giving stock tips, Joyce is less consistent when it comes to giving other types of financial advice, as demonstrated in the example of her client Robert for whom she gave tips on real estate purchases.

If you were to meet Joyce today, you would see an upbeat and energetic but frail, elderly woman. If she were to stand up in front of you, you would notice the scoliosis in her spine and the sudden grimace on her face; this indication of pain is not only the result of the sciatica Joyce developed from taking care of her sick mother and Johnny when he became paralyzed after a stroke, but also because of the infected abscess located where her tailbone used to be, before it fractured and was removed in the 80s. If you were to talk to her further about her medical history, she would tell you about how her skull was broken in a car accident when she was a teenager. She might also tell you about the mesh in her abdomen, also infected, which is a leftover from a botched bypass surgery that she underwent in 1975. I could go on about how she had her gall bladder removed, ten hernia repairs, secondary Addison's disease, atherosclerosis, arteriosclerosis, allergies...the list goes on and on.

Joyce believes that she particularly skilled in reading her clients' medical conditions, stating, "I think I'm good at diagnosing other people's health problems because I've had so many of those problems myself." This belief was echoed by another woman from the Detroit area with whom I spoke with in December of 2013 named Anne, who is a self-professed 'medical intuitive' and healer. Like Joyce, Anne has been managing long-term health problems that have resulted from an auto accident that she survived twenty years ago. The most acute of her injuries was the trauma to her brain that has caused her to suffer from short term memory loss. Anne described to me her daily life by analogy with the film *Memento*, which features a protagonist who suffers from anterograde amnesia, a condition that results in a partial or complete inability to recall the recent past. The act of carrying out a simple conversation is difficult for Anne, who warns me that she is can completely forget something said to her within ten minutes. Her condition can lead to extreme frustration, for example, when she is driving and finds herself lost,

even though she is only minutes away from her home. It can even put her in life-threatening situations, such as when she forgets to take her seizure medication. For Anne, the use of her psychic intuition is both a normal and necessary part of her everyday life, and like Joyce, she feels her ability to provide diagnosis is the result of her experience with physical trauma.

Of course, the experience of physical injury is not a requirement to be a psychic (at least not to degree undergone by Joyce and Anne), since, as Joyce previously stated, the psychic faculty is understood to be universal. But if it is not directly produced by physical affliction, it is possible that Joyce and Anne's abilities are amplified by them. Perhaps being in constant pain allows them to be more sensitive to the "motor innervations" that Benjamin speaks of. This would also make sense in terms of the psycholinguistic theory of divination put forth in the previous chapter. Perhaps the psychic's continuous proximity to death pushes her closer to what Mladen Dolar calls a "zero degree of subjectivity," understood as the approximate limit between the Symbolic and the Real. Thus it would be due to her immediacy to biological death and concurrently, to subjective death, that the psychic approaches the *jouissance* of her primordial being. In other words, it is by way of a differential approach towards the limit of the zero of nonexistence—a nothingness that is beyond the Symbolic and is therefore death—that the (im)possibility of what is understood as psychic reading—as reading the Real—is performed.

A Critique of Supernatural Reason

Generally speaking, anthropology has approached the magical or occult aspects of human behavior—which include the practice of spirit possession, ritual curing, witchcraft, and divination—from two, opposing historical perspectives. The first proceeds from a social evolutionary standpoint that understands history as a movement of progress and locates those practices within an embryonic or primitive stage of human development; subsequently, it is presumed that magical thought is historically compelled through evolution towards the so-called civilized forms of religion and science. The second rejects the idea of progress in favor of a relativist notion of history; in this case, practices within a specific culture are considered from within the particular social circumstances that produce them rather than from a universal schema, so that accordingly, magical practices are understood as comparable to religion and science rather than simply preceding them as an earlier form.

The first perspective was developed by the 19th century anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor who promoted a three-stage theory of cultural evolution that begins with savagery, passes through barbarism, and ends in civilization; correspondingly, he also advanced an evolutionary theory of religion that begins with animism, passes through polytheism, and ends with monotheism. Other theorists who may be located on the side of this unilinear model of cultural development include James Frazer, whose position is a modification of Tylor's to the extent that he argued for a historical progression from magic to religion and then to science, as well as Emile Durkheim, whose theory of totemism as the "elementary" form of religion in turn became the lens through which he described how social cohesion is produced, namely, through the delineation of the sacred and the profane. In addition, although he was not an anthropologist,

Sigmund Freud also posited a theory of magic which he developed from a psychoanalytical framework. A supporter of the theory of recapitulation, which is widely understood through the oft-quoted phrase “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” Freud argued that magical beliefs were analogous with childhood neuroses, and in turn, that they have been surmounted by scientific rationality in the adult stage of (Western) civilization.

The second anthropological perspective, which is the tradition of cultural relativism established by Franz Boas, seeks to understand the development of specific cultures, not through the lens of a universal teleology, but through the framework of their particular circumstances. Boas’ method, which was a response to the ethnocentric bias of anthropology and the pervasive influence of social Darwinism over the human sciences in his time, constituted a new paradigm through which other areas of anthropological inquiry in addition to the question of race would be directed, including its application by subsequent anthropologists towards the understanding of magic. Among these include Bronislaw Malinowski, who on the one hand believed that science operates in all cultures including so-called primitive ones, and on the other hand asserted that magic and religion perform the same function, which is to alleviate emotional or psychological stress. Accordingly, Malinowski supported the notion that magic should be recognized as both rational as well as pragmatic.

Although he was not engaged in historical particularism, E.E. Evans-Pritchard was also a proponent of the comparative method insofar as he used it to demonstrate differences and similarities between cultures, and in this sense he could be classified as an epistemological relativist. For example, in his well-known study of the practice of witchcraft by the Azande of southern Sudan, Evans-Pritchard demonstrated that the Azande were in fact aware of natural causation, and at the same time, they maintained their belief in witchcraft by means of an internal

rationality through which accidents and events of misfortune are made intelligible at the social level of explanation.

Another anthropologist who could be classified in the relativist tradition is Claude Lévi-Strauss, who departed from the structural-functionalist approach of Evans-Pritchard by developing a theoretical framework derived from Ferdinand de Saussure's model of structural linguistics. Lévi-Strauss' method, known as structural anthropology, eschewed evolutionism by seeking to uncover a universal "deep structure" of human consciousness through the analysis of myth. According to him, not only do myth and language operate according to the same principles, but more importantly, they should be understood as being one in the same; in his words, "myth *is* language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech."¹ Lévi-Strauss also argued that magic and science should be understood as "parallel modes" of knowledge in the sense that they both function according to the same mental operations, and states that "They differ not so much in kind as in the different types of phenomena to which they are applied."²

Against these two anthropological currents, I argue that while the practice of contemporary psychic mediumship should not be placed within a social-evolutionary framework where it would be equated to a so-called primitive mode of thought, it also should not only be understood as relative to scientific practices. Instead, my thesis asserts instead that psychic mediumship, as demonstrated by its popularity here in the U.S., is remainder or trace of those earlier, magical beliefs that have been supposedly overcome by Enlightenment rationality. Furthermore, while it can certainly be argued that psychic mediumship fulfills a social function, I

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth" in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 209.

² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 13.

maintain that an understanding of it cannot be found in a functional explanation alone. Likewise, where it can be shown that psychic mediumship is effectual, this cannot only be demonstrated solely on psychological grounds. On the contrary, my thesis asserts that the effectiveness of psychic mediumship cannot be attributed to any singular explanation, scientific or otherwise, insofar as the relation between a particular rationale and its veracity, verifiability, or truthfulness is continuously marked by a displacement. This would be the case insofar as all forms of explanation are motivated by belief, for where belief is the necessary element through which magical outcomes are produced, it would also be required by science insofar as rational belief—the category of faith that Kant designates to pure reason—presupposes science and makes possible the positive affirmation of all scientific determinations.³ As such, the belief in psychic mediumship should be considered as a continuation of a general belief in divination that has survived in the modern era.

Providing that belief is at once both universal and particular, this paradox results in the incommensurability between each and every belief to the other, and subsequently, to the impossibility of determining an ultimate truth. We might say that the establishment of a belief always opens the possibility of its becoming supplanted by another belief, a process that once commenced, would proceed indefinitely. This would still be true in the instances where magical efficacy is accorded to supernatural causes: where this form of *general* belief operates in the traditional realm of myth, it does so only through *particular* beliefs that would correspond to specific myths, and following Lévi-Strauss who tells us that myths are never static but rather are

³ In a more fundamental sense, belief is not only a necessary condition for the production and mobilization of knowledge but is a fundamental component of the communicative act itself. As Derrida suggests, every communicative exchange requires an implicit oath to by one who addresses the other to be truthful. This oath is given to the other of the receiver/addressee, who in return gives to the sender his belief in the truthfulness of that communication. In short, there is no communication without faith. For more on Derrida's writing on this subject, see *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money (Vol. 1)* and "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Mere Reason."

continuously variable and changing, the belief that is consequently attached to each configuration of mythical explanation is likewise seen as mutable when perceived from a diachronic perspective. But despite the general relativism of belief, a critical difference nevertheless remains between the opposition of science and magic. This particular confrontation is distinguished by the operation of a foreclosure of the latter within the former, a move that does not relativize but rather succeeds in supplanting one form of belief over another.

In order to undo this foreclosure, I will first risk the pretense of a tautology and assert that all magical practices, including that of psychic mediumship, function according to a 'logic' that is neither rational nor irrational. If we accept that magic does not ultimately function according to any logic, we should also understand that it also does not have any nature, because by definition it is beyond nature. Magic, in other words and quite simply, is supernatural. However, to relate magic to the supernatural is not to abandon it to the domain of irrationality, but is merely a way of attributing it to non-rational causes, or to ascribe it to that which is beyond rational, which is to say, to the sur-rational. And it is by its according it to its proper domain that magic may escape its reduction to any logic established on either natural or cultural (i.e. evolutionist or relativist) grounds. Such a determination would allow it to circumvent the binary opposition of nature and culture that has been sustained by the two anthropological currents described heretofore. Where this argument may be dismissed for its rhetorical phrasing, and where it can be criticized for allowing mystical thought to become the conceptual panacea for the investigation of magical practices, it is nevertheless the only way that the experiences of those individuals whom I have interviewed, as well as my own experiences related to this project, can be interpreted.

But where it may seem redundant to equate the supernatural to magic, what is less obvious is the relationship between the former with language, and it is to this question that the focus of my thesis will turn. In the case of psychic mediumship, the exploration of this question may be particularly useful since it may illuminate an understanding of the status of the text that is characteristic of the performance of psychic reading. This special category of text is of the kind that may be ascertained from the images in a deck of tarot cards, for example, or more abstractly, from the lines on the palm of one's hands, or even more impossibly, from the physical sensations that are perceived in the absence of any measurable stimuli; as a consequence, the psychic text cannot be understood through the general framework of phonetic or hieroglyphic writing. As such, it must be developed from a conception of language that exceeds the structuralist framework through which Lévi-Strauss' notion of the symbolic efficacy of magic is established. Since Lévi-Strauss was the first to question the relationship between magic and language, I will begin with a critique of the structuralist interpretation of magic in order to explicate an alternative understanding of the status of the text in psychic mediumship, as well as to support my argument that magic should be equated to the supernatural.

In his essay "The Effectiveness of Symbols," Lévi-Strauss argues for the efficacy of magical healing through his reading of an ethnographic account that describes a Cuna shaman's performance of an incantation designed to facilitate a difficult childbirth. According to Lévi-Strauss, the cure is successfully rendered by making intelligible the cause of the affliction that was hitherto unknown to the woman in labor. By articulating the cause of both the illness and the cure within the woman's worldview, that is, in terms of Cuna mythology, the shaman induces a psychological response that in turn produces a physiological reaction. Lévi-Strauss states that "The shaman provides the sick woman with a *language*," and where this language produces a

psychosomatic response, the shaman is able to induce a cure through the magic of language itself. Moreover, the idea of the efficacy of magical language is developed a step further through a comparative analysis, which is accomplished through the juxtaposition of the magical healing rite with modern psychoanalysis. Lévi-Strauss does this by setting the two practices in an obverse relationship to one other, a move that can be summarized in his declaration that “the psychoanalyst listens, where the shaman speaks.” In other words, the shaman’s ability to manipulate symbols produces an effective response in the client that is equivalent to the production of abreaction in psychoanalytic therapy.⁴

The comparison between magic and psychoanalysis is certainly justified, especially in the case of psychic mediumship where the parallels between the two are even more markedly evident. For those who go to psychics for counseling, the two practices may be nearly indistinguishable. For example, among some of Joyce’s regular clients whom I interviewed was a woman named Janet, a single, middle-aged Caucasian woman who is employed as sales representative for a healthcare manufacturing company. Janet admitted to me that she has seen other psychics in the past and has also received intermittent psychotherapeutic counseling. I asked her if she saw any similarities between psychotherapy and psychic mediumship, to which she replied, “From my point of view, I don’t see a difference. People go to both in order to get help or advice with the issues that they’re dealing with in their lives.”

I then asked, “If that’s the case, do you prefer one over the other? And if so, can you explain why?”

Janet replied, “Oh, that’s easy. I would always rather go to a psychic. Think about it: a good psychic can do what a good psychotherapist does, which is to listen to you and help you get

⁴ See Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Effectiveness of Symbols” in in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963)

stuff off your chest and to help you deal with your issues. But a psychic has something that a psychotherapist doesn't have, which is their psychic power. They can see things that a psychotherapist can't."

Despite Janet's initial assertion that there is no difference between the two practices, it turns out that there is one, which of course is the psychic's ability to divine knowledge of the world.⁵ However in the case of Joyce, the difference is even less perceptible because of her background in social work. On two separate occasions, I have observed Joyce agree to give psychic readings over the phone, only to see her perform them without involving any apparent use of divination. Instead, those conversations revolved around the discussion of those clients' emotional issues: the first was primarily concerned with expressing frustrations pertaining to marital problems, and the second client simply wanted to express her feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Furthermore, as stated in the previous chapter, Joyce has given lectures at the University of Michigan on the use of psychic intuition within the context of the practice of social work. She has described to the students the various services that she provided throughout her social work career, including the counseling of prison inmates, providing home healthcare, and helping children with disabilities, and claimed that in all of these cases her psychic ability was an indispensable tool. Accordingly, we can observe that for Joyce, the line between being a psychic and being a social worker is constantly blurred.

Despite the similarities, it would be incorrect to attribute the efficacy of psychic mediumship as well as other forms of magic solely to a principle that would be comparable to that of abreaction in psychoanalysis, for while the possibility that magic can express its

⁵ My employment of the notion of the world is guided by Edmund Husserl's concept of the 'lifeworld,' understood as an intersubjective rather than static ground on which human experience unfolds. Following Husserl, we might say that the psychic produces her 'objective truths' by treating the world as a legible object at the same time that this world constitutes the ground on which her performance takes place. For more on Husserl's concept, see *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*.

effectiveness psychosomatically certainly exists, it cannot be limited to this explanation insofar it does not exclude the possibility of a supernormal one. At the same time, without a broader consideration of magical efficacy, Lévi-Strauss's psychologism opens the door for the other psychopathological interpretations of phenomena related to magic that would discount them—Freud's analogy between superstitious beliefs and childhood neurosis, as well as the psychiatric interpretation of spirit possession as a symptom of schizophrenia, come to mind. In order to open the possibility of an alternative explanation for the effectiveness of magic, there are two issues in Lévi-Strauss' model that should be addressed: the first pertains to the validity of his psychoanalytic interpretation, and the second concerns his foreclosure of the supernatural.

Where Lévi-Strauss asserts that the Cuna shaman gives the pregnant woman a language, we may ask, was the woman not already in possession of it? For if her condition was one in which she was found to be lacking language, then according to Lévi-Strauss' own logic, there would be no social consensus, no common understanding, and consequently, no system of belief that would make the healing possible in the first place. If a language has been given in all of this, then it might be more accurate to say that it was given to Lévi-Strauss himself through his reception of the Cuna incantation. In this sense, we might say that it was Lévi-Strauss who had undergone difficulty in labor—the labor of anthropological interpretation—and following his reception of the language of Cuna magic in the form of the ethnographic account, he was able to give birth to an understanding of the efficacy of magical healing. But this understanding can only be true insofar as it was rendered according to the worldview of Lévi-Strauss' own social milieu, where the science or logic of psychoanalysis would be exemplary. Subsequently, we could say that Lévi-Strauss' analysis renders magic intelligible, first and foremost, to himself: to cure or to

supplement his own lack, which would be his inability to comprehend the Cuna belief that magical efficacy should be assigned to divine provenance.

We also might say that where Lévi-Strauss' investigation renders a translation, the critical achievement of his reading lies not in its relativization of the conventions of magic and science, but in the transposition of the belief that sustains each respective system. Where the a supplantation of one belief for another—the belief in science over that of magic—occurs in Lévi-Strauss's analysis (and this would be an apparent displacement that in actuality would be an instance of believing through the other), in other cases the simultaneous belief in both science and magic may be possible, as demonstrated in the example of Janet who attributes the effectiveness of psychic mediumship to both. In contrast, by submitting the shamanic cure exclusively to the psychoanalytic myth of Oedipus, Lévi-Strauss's allows his own belief to preclude an interpretation of magical efficacy that would attribute the woman's healing to the supernatural. On the one hand, it is through the relativist procedure that arranges the two practices as parallel modes of thought that allows him to maintain an anti-evolutionist stance regarding magic; but on the other, this move also forecloses the supernatural within the binary distinction of nature and culture, which is the central one for Lévi-Strauss since it provides the foundation on which the entire project of structural anthropological theory rests.

There is additional ethnographic evidence that not only questions Lévi-Strauss' theoretical proposition, it shakes the foundation on which his theory has been constructed. As a result, the data will necessitate a reconsideration of the possibility for something like a supernumerary sensibility to exist in the Cuna healing ritual. According to Macpherson Chapin, who conducted subsequent fieldwork amongst the Cuna, the *nele* or shaman is only consulted after a woman's delivery has been delayed for many hours. When the *nele* arrives, he or she does

not enter the hut, as Lévi-Strauss had assumed, but chants on the other side of a partition in an adjacent building and is therefore never physically present during the delivery. In other words, the pregnant woman does not hear the *nele*'s incantation at all. In addition, Chapin states that the language used by the *nele* is that of the esoteric discourse of spirits rather than ordinary Cuna vernacular, so that even if the woman could hear the chanting of the rite, she would still not be able to understand it.⁶ Although this information was not available to Lévi-Strauss at the time his essay was written, he nevertheless overlooked an important and similar observation about the curing chant made by Homer and Wassen in the original publication their observations of the curing chant:

Like so many other species of literary composition of a magical or mystical nature, the song of Mu-Igala cannot be rightly understood except by the medicine man himself or those initiated by him. It is possible to make a thoroughly literal translation of its contents, but its hidden meaning remains secret on many points.”⁷

Considering this information, it is entirely conceivable that the cure was not produced as a result of the ritual. However, it is also equally possible that the cure had in fact taken place due to the shaman's direct intervention, or more precisely, due to the Cuna spirits who intervened on the shaman's behalf, which would have constituted an instance of magical efficacy in the supernatural sense.

Lévi-Strauss' rejection of the supernatural can be found in his other writings on magic and is particularly explicit in *The Savage Mind*. There, he states that magical operations are “*additions* to the objective order of the universe: they present the same necessity to those

⁶ See Mac Chapin, “Muu Ikala: Cuna Birth Ceremony” in *Ritual and Symbol in Native America*, ed. Philip Young and James Howe (Eugene: University of Oregon Anthropological Papers No. 9, 1976)

⁷ Nils M. Holmer and Henry S. Wassen, *The Complete Mu-Igala in Picture Writing: a Native Record of a Cuna Indian Medicine Song*, *Etnologiska Studier*: 21 (Göteborg: Göteborg Etnografiska Museum, 1953), 14.

performing them as the sequence of natural causes, in which the agent believes himself simply to be inserting *supplementary* links through his rites” (my emphasis).⁸ Moreover, he qualifies this magical supplement as artifice (albeit a rational one, insofar as it is rationalized by him): in his words, it is the “‘normal’ recourse to *fraud* and *trickery* during magical operations” (my emphasis) that is normalized as a supplement.⁹ Lévi-Strauss also states that, “fraud is consubstantial with magic, and, strictly speaking the sorcerer never ‘cheats.’ The difference between his theory and his practice is one of degree, not of kind.”¹⁰ In other words, the sorcerer does not recognize magic as a supplement, that is, as trickery or fraud, since for him the difference between rationality and magic is not marked; his mind is understood to be undivided, since it differentiates human action in terms of degree and not in kind.

Once the artifice of magic is established, Lévi-Strauss can exorcise the excess of the supernatural—as unnamable and indefinable, and therefore, as that which transgresses the laws of both nature and culture—in favor of the phallic, logocentric order of rationality. Again, he performs this expulsion through the relativization of the primitive and the modern, stating:

There is therefore no need to invoke the exercise for vanished faculties or the employment of some supernumerary sensibility to understand the penetration which so-called primitives show in their observation and interpretation of natural phenomena. The procedure of the American Indian who follows a trail by means of imperceptible clues or the Australian who unhesitatingly identifies the footprints left by any member of his group is no different from our procedure when we drive a car and asses the

⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 221.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

moment to pass or avoid a vehicle at a glance, by a slight turn of the wheels, a fluctuation in the normal speed of the engine or even the supposed intention of a look.¹¹

Lévi-Strauss compares these two very different modes of traveling to demonstrate his view that mystical or supernatural explanations for other types of phenomena, namely those that result from magical practices, are not necessary. Where the American Indians' ability to navigate through the wilderness cannot be comprehended by the modern driver who weaves through city traffic and vice versa, Lévi-Strauss asserts that the inability to comprehend an alien mode of knowledge should not lead one to deduce that it does not conform to rationality, so that we should not confuse something that is not immediately comprehensible with the supernatural.

Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss completes the foreclosure of the supernatural through its appropriation within the binary distinction between nature and culture. According to him, "The notion of a supernature exists only for a humanity which attributes supernatural powers to itself and in return ascribes the powers of its superhumanity to nature."¹² Since the supernatural is that which must exceed the laws of nature (which in fact can only be deduced through culture), it threatens nature/culture opposition that forms the very basis of the structural anthropological method. As a result, he must neutralize its excess by confining it within the distinction, where it is transformed into a mere reflection of the one and the other.

In contradistinction to Lévi-Strauss' approach, I will propose an alternative method through which magical practices may be comprehended, one that will be grounded in a theory of language and at the same time will remain faithful to the definition of the supernatural that has been put forth. But before this challenge is taken up, it should be noted that the question of belief will always be suspended in anticipation of any theoretical analysis, because in actuality, it is

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹² *Ibid.*, 221.

precisely the question of maintaining a certain *faithfulness* or belief in the meaning of a signifier—which in this case is that of ‘supernatural’—that would have already constituted the ground on which such an inquiry could be deployed. With that being said, we will begin this examination by turning to the work of Georges Bataille, who, along with Benjamin, was also briefly associated with the Surrealist movement and who subsequently became one of its most important dissidents. More specifically, it is through Bataille’s concept of base materiality that an understanding of the materiality of language can be developed. This in turn will make possible the establishment of relation between the supernatural and language, and consequently, to help discern the status of the text in psychic mediumship.

Among Georges Bataille’s most important theoretical contributions was his theory of base materiality, a notion that he developed in conjunction with his theory of economy. An understanding of the relation between the two requires an elaboration on Bataille’s notion of general economy, which he contrasted against that of the restricted economy. In opposition to the concept of the restricted economy, which is understood as the form of exchange that occurs in the marketplace or where economy is reduced to the notions of production, conservation, calculation, and property, Bataille posited an entirely radical notion of general economy, which approaches economics from a cosmic, macroeconomic perspective. This latter model is ascertained by following the general flow of energy in the universe, through which the course of its movement begins with the solar energy of the sun, where it is continuously transferred and transformed into geological, ecological, and biological modes of exchange, and where it may be further realized in the form of monetary value within a social economy.

Bataille developed this concept of general economy through Marcel Mauss’ anthropological examination of the gift, which was observed by Mauss as the principle form of

exchange amongst North American Indians and the Polynesian Maori. From Mauss' descriptions of the North American potlatch and the Maori principle of reciprocity, Bataille concluded that these forms of exchange ultimately tend towards consumption. In addition, he claimed that the logic of the gift can most easily be discerned in the form of ritual sacrifice, that is, in those ceremonies where gifts are given to the gods, since it is through sacrifice that the absolute destruction of surplus energy is realized. Accordingly, Bataille believed that the general economic movement of the universe was inherently wasteful, and where its tendency towards expenditure is realized biologically in death, the experience of expenditure can also be experienced in life, that is, in moments of anguish, laughter, and ecstasy.

Bataille developed the concept of base matter in order to depart from all previous notions of materialism, which he understood as having failed to break from idealism. Materialism, according to Bataille, is only another form of idealism in the sense that it idealizes matter. He states that:

Most materialists, even though they may have wanted to do away with all spiritual entities, ended up positing an order of things whose hierarchical relations mark it as specifically idealist. They situated dead matter at the summit of a conventional hierarchy of diverse facts, without perceiving that in this way they gave into an obsession with the *ideal* form of matter, with a form that was closer than another other to what matter *should* be. Dead matter, the pure idea, and God in fact answer a question in the same way... a question that can only be posed by philosophers, the question of the essence of things, precisely the *idea* by which things become intelligible.¹³

¹³ Georges Bataille, "Materialism" in *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-1938*, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 15.

For Bataille, the idealization of matter implies its abstraction, thus transforming it into “dead matter” within an order of classification that can only lead upwards to the highest form of ideality: to that of a transcendental God. Against this idealization, Bataille’s base materialism rejects systemization and hierarchical ordering in favor of a heterogeneous and unstructured disposition towards materiality that would embrace the forms of unproductive expenditure that had been excluded by both idealism and materialism. These would include: “luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity,” which is to say, all of the substances, actions, and ideas that “have no end beyond themselves.”¹⁴

For Bataille, the concept of base materiality is not only necessary to release matter from the confines of the restricted economy where they would be directed towards idealization through reification and calculation, but it is also required to liberate it from the law of the ideal, which is to say, from truth. The radicality of this notion can be found in the following description, which is perhaps Bataille’s most definitive description of base materiality: “In this way the boundless refuse of activity pushes human plans—including those associated with economic operations—into the game of characterizing universal matter; matter, in fact, can only be defined as the *nonlogical difference* that represents in relation to the *economy* of the universe what *crime* represents to the law.”¹⁵ At first glance, it might be assumed that the relation between economy and law in this formulation is deployed as an analogy through which a description of base materialism can be made, and it also might be supposed that the figure of law in the comparison is meant to indicate social law. However, this comparison between economy and law can also be taken literally, that is, where the figure of a crime may also refer to the transgression

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure” in *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-1938* trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1985), 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

of the law of logic (the logic of the restricted economy as well as the ideal of logic or the logic of ideality). Moreover, the figure of law is not only limited to its expression as social law, which is to say, the laws that are produced and applied by culture; from a universal or general standpoint, this figure of law must include all forms of law, including those of nature.

Following Bataille, we may posit that the laws of nature (meaning physical or scientific law, but this would also apply to natural law in legal theory) operate within the nature/culture distinction because they are neither exterior nor prior to a base material reality; these laws are ideological constructions that function to idealize materiality, and have been instrumentalized in our modern era towards the exploitation of both nature and culture in order to accelerate the expansion of the restricted economy of capitalism. Accordingly, we can say in this sense that Bataille's theory of materiality is a theory of the supernatural: where base materiality is understood as *a nonlogical difference*, it therefore defies its being subsumed by any logic or law or to any ideal; it exceeds and transgresses all laws, including the laws of nature. In other words, base matter, which constitutes all matter in the universe, *is* supernatural.

In light of this notion, we will once again return to Lévi-Strauss to examine his concept of the floating signifier to see how it much it approximates Bataille's notion of base materiality, as well as to help our understanding of the relationship between the supernatural and language. Lévi-Strauss was also influenced by the work of Mauss, whose observations on the gift economy were transposed onto Lévi-Strauss' own theory of language. Mauss described the Maori concept of *hau*, understood as the magical force or "spirit of the gift" that demands the that the gift be reciprocated and returned to its owner, as well as the concept of *mana*, the force that resides in people, animals, and objects, which can be lost or gained depending on whether or not one fails to reciprocate gifts. According to Lévi-Strauss, the words *hau* and *mana* constitute a specific

type of semiotic category; where according to Mauss there is “the hau of personal property, the hau of the taonga, the hau of the forest,” Lévi-Strauss understood them as having “a zero symbolic value, that is, a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content over and above that which the signified already contains.”¹⁶ In other words, insofar as these terms can be transposed onto any other, then they would be designated as “floating” signifiers, and inasmuch as they have no meaning in themselves and correspond to unspecified or even nonexistent signifieds, such signifiers are considered by Lévi-Strauss as “empty.”

However, I would argue that this invariable qualification of the floating signifier with emptiness also precludes the possibility of its being regarded as *overflowing*. Against Lévi-Strauss’ presumption, it may be hypothesized that in certain circumstances the floating signifier could become the mark of the experience of the uncanny. Again, where we have previously defined the uncanny as the experience of a lack of the lack (of that which constitutes the subject in the Symbolic), the floating signifier would become a mark of an excess of meaning and consequently function as a point of reference around which an experience of the uncanny would be oriented. And once more, this experience is possible insofar as it is sustained by belief. For example, in the case of the signifiers *mana* and *hau*, it would be impossible for any analysis of the function of these terms (insofar as we are speaking of the specific cultural context in which they are used) not to consider the operation of belief since they would necessarily be deployed within a system of belief that constitutes the Maori worldview. Such a possibility is either circumvented or dismissed by Lévi-Strauss, since he himself does not share in the same belief.

An example that will demonstrate this alternative hypothesis can be found in an account that Bataille relates in his personal journal. In an entry dated September 30, 1939, he discusses

¹⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (London: Routledge, 1987), 64.

the death of his lover and collaborator Colette Peignot, who is referred to by her *nom de plume*, Laure:

When it was all over, I found myself sifting through her papers, reading pages that I had noticed for the first time during the period just before her death. When I read what she had written, I experienced one of the most violent emotions of my life, but I was never more deeply nor brutally affected than when I read the last sentence of a passage on the sacred. I had never expressed to her that paradoxical idea that the sacred is communication. I myself discovered the notion only once I had put it into words, a few moments before I noticed that Laure was about to die without a doubt. Nothing I had ever said to her came close to expressing this idea. The whole question was so important to me that I remember how and when everything happened. What's more, we almost never carried on "intellectual conversations." Once she even blamed me for not taking her seriously. The truth is, I disdained the inevitable impudence of "intellectual conversations."

Finally, towards the bottom of the page, I found the following sentences in Laure's scrawl: "A poetic work is sacred to the extent that it is the creation of a topical event, 'communication' experienced as nudity. It is self-rape, denuding, communicating to others a reason to live, for this reason to live 'displaces itself.'" Exactly what I had written in my article, since my notion of "unity in communication" figures implicitly in Laure's ideas.¹⁷

Where Bataille's adaptation of Durkheim's sociology has led to the association of the notion of the sacred with taboo, heterology, excess, mysticism, and in this case, with "communication," we

¹⁷ Georges Bataille, "The Culprit" in *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader*, ed. Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer (Semiotext(e): Los Angeles and New York, 2001), 111-112.

may speak of the general treatment of the term ‘sacred’ as a floating signifier, as well as an implicit belief in the idea of the sacred that is functioning in Bataille’s account. What results at the intersection of this belief and the contingent event of discovering Laure’s papers is a “violent,” uncanny, experience: the ghostly communication by Laure after her death of the concept of the sacred as communication, which Bataille implies may also have been unconsciously communicated between the two of them as it was being formulated by each of them separately. In this example, we see that the floating signifier ‘sacred,’ where it previously had no definitive relation to a particular signified, had been subsequently transformed into a marker of excess and of the uncanny.

In view of this, we will now read Bataille against Lévi-Strauss by way of Lacan. Where Lacan identifies the psychoanalytic order of the Symbolic with the “necessary” and the order of the Real with the “impossible,” he also defines the former as “that which doesn’t stop being written,” and the latter as “that which doesn’t stop not being written.”¹⁸ Subsequently, we could say that Lévi-Strauss’s explication of the supernatural is an attempt to make it legible within the Symbolic—the order that encloses the opposition between nature and culture. Conversely, we may conflate the Real with the supernatural and with Bataille’s notion of base materiality, since these would operate within the order of the impossible and of the not written. Indeed, the concept of the sacred would also be categorized with the supernatural insofar as it is maintained in a relation of heterogeneity with respect to the opposition of sacred and profane. This distinction would likewise be enclosed within the order of the Symbolic, but it is precisely the movement of the transgression of this opposition rather than realization of the actual self-presence of the sacred that is the objective of Bataille’s project. As his personal account demonstrates, insofar as

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973 (Encore, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton and Company, 1988), 59.

this movement is also bound to the necessity of writing, the non-presence of heterogeneous, non-logical difference cannot be known but may rather be experienced in the feeling of the uncanny. From this we could postulate that where the writing of the Symbolic never ceases, it would also anticipate an incessant return of the uncanny in accordance to the logic of repetition. Moreover, where this sensation is facilitated by belief, we may qualify Lacan's maxim and say that it is ultimately by means of belief that "what is foreclosed in the symbolic returns in the real."¹⁹

In terms of psychic mediumship, Benjamin's statement that divination is a form of reading "what was never written" bears a striking resemblance to Lacan's definition of the Real. Where he claims that, "Such reading is the most ancient: reading prior to all languages, from entrails, the stars, or dances," from Bataille's perspective, if all matter in the world is constituted by base materiality, then the phenomenal materiality of the world can be understood as a trace of that base material which is "never written." Correspondingly, since the form of reading that Benjamin describes is fundamentally impossible, his assertion can be modified to say instead that divination is the reading of the *traces* of what was never written. Thus the (base) materiality of the world could be simultaneously thought of as the materiality of language, and everything that exists in the phenomenal world legible as a text, or more properly, as trace.²⁰

The inscription that the psychic reads is the trace of the history of the world, since the materiality of the world always contains the traces of its own history, which is to say, the history of its materiality. This would also be the case in the instance where divination is employed to discover unknown truths about the future, because the materiality of the world also contains the

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960 (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII)*, Jacques-Alain Miller, ed., Dennis Porter, trans. (New York: Norton and Company, 1992), 131.

²⁰ Base materialism can be understood as a precursor to Jacques Derrida's deconstructive notion of arche-writing, which is synonymous with his notion of trace. For an understanding of Bataille's influence on Derrida, see *Writing and Differmce* (the University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1978). On Derrida's notion of trace, see *Of Grammatology* (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1976).

traces of its future history. However, it would be more appropriate to say that where history is produced through psychic mediumship, it should be understood from the perspective of myth. This is to say that when a psychic performs a reading, this act of deciphering can also be understood as an automatic writing of myths. Consequently, if the myth that she produces conforms to something that can be perceived as truth, it does so only by way of the intersection of contingency and belief.

Presentimental Speculations

As of this writing, the city of Detroit is preparing for an upcoming legal hearing to determine its eligibility for bankruptcy protection from its creditors. If the motion is approved, Detroit will become the largest municipality to become insolvent in U.S. history with an estimated \$18-20 billion dollars in debt. The city has been moving towards economic decline for many decades, well before the recent auto industry crisis and the current bankruptcy dispute, and this is immediately evidenced by its crumbling infrastructure and the rows of burnt Victorian homes that populate its residential districts. My impression of Detroit during my initial visit was that it looked like the aftermath of a bombing campaign. This comparison of the city's condition to the form of destruction inflicted by modern warfare is a not uncommon analogy by both visitors and residents, and is one that has even been reiterated by Detroit's own police force, who in a recent public declaration described it as a "war zone."²¹

I recall driving with Joyce and her granddaughter Sarah as they gave me my first tour of the city. While listening to Joyce reminisce with sadness about "the way the city used to be," I looked at the empty buildings and experienced a feeling of the uncanny that was much different than the one I had previously felt in my interactions with psychics. Stopping at an intersection, we were surprised at the sight of a man who unexpectedly emerged from the front door of a half burnt home. Where my presumption that those homes were empty was overcome by the realization that they were possibly occupied, my initial feeling of shock was quickly replaced by the sensation that we were being watched. Furthermore, where these structures produced the impression of being haunted by the memories of those who once inhabited them, it was also not

²¹ See Kathryn Larson, "Enter At Your Own Risk: Police Union Says 'War-Like' Detroit Is Unsafe For Visitors," October 6, 2012, <http://detroit.cbslocal.com/2012/10/06/enter-at-your-own-risk-police-union-says-war-like-detroit-is-unsafe-for-visitors/>

difficult to wonder if they contained the bodies belonging to murder victims or of those who have died from drug overdoses—the discovery of these being a regular occurrence in Detroit. While we drove past the charred remains of those neighborhoods from the safety of our car, I could not help but think of the similar, mass-mediated images of destruction that have resulted from U.S. military activities in other places around the world. So in a strange, uncanny way, it is precisely from the vantage point of a moving automobile, which is at once the symbol of American prosperity as well as of the economic problems that shadow the region, that one can perceive in Detroit an image of the American Dream subsequent to its transformation into the American Nightmare.

With Detroit in the backdrop, it may not come as a surprise that the demand for the services of psychic mediums has increased since the 2008 economic downturn. Joyce has also seen a rise in the number of new clients in recent years, which also mirrors her experience about ten years after she began her formal psychic practice. During my first telephone conversation with her, Joyce recalled an extraordinary account that involved an automobile executive for whom she performed a reading. She often received visits during the late 70s and early 80s from auto industry employees who sought her advice, in her words, “Out of fear of losing their jobs.” Recalling that this was the period of the first auto industry crisis (which resulted due to an increase in foreign competition and high oil prices) and that Chrysler was on the verge of bankruptcy in 1979, Joyce’s anecdote certainly corresponds to the economic climate of that time. She stated that these businessmen would consistently schedule consultations early in the morning before going to their offices, and in order to protect their identities, they almost unanimously identified themselves under the pseudonym, “Mr. Smith.”

While she was in the process of giving a reading to one of these executives, Joyce noticed a strange sensation in her groin. Shifting herself from side to side in her chair and tugging at her trousers as if there was something lodged between her legs, it was as though she had suddenly acquired male genitalia. In a state of both confusion and embarrassment, she struggled to cope with the alien sensation while trying to interpret its meaning, and not too long afterwards, she decided that the feeling was a sign that Mr. Smith had prostate cancer. When he heard the diagnosis, the man reacted with anger and accused Joyce of being a fraud. Weeks later, Mr. Smith called Joyce from a hospital and said, "I'm the man whose penis you had. I'm calling to apologize. I was so angry. I told my wife that you were a phony, but she said to me 'You should go to the doctor anyway, and if this woman is wrong then you can send her the medical bill.' I'm calling you because I want to thank you." Afterwards, Mr. Smith's doctor phoned Joyce to tell her that he had never detected prostate cancer so early in the process of its growth as he had with this particular patient.²² Following these telephone conversations, Joyce received several referrals for psychic counseling that she suspects were the result of the impressive reading she performed for that particular man.

This account is a more dramatic example of Joyce's purported ability to identify her client's medical problems through her capacity to experience the physical sensations of others. According to Elias Canetti, this ability would be a manifestation of the faculty transformation, which he refers to as the "specific gift and pleasure" that distinguishes man from other animals.²³ In his view, the ability arose from man's inclination to exceed himself, that is, from his desire "to be more."²⁴ In *Crowds and Power*, where Canetti asserts that this faculty was initially exercised

²² It may be worth noting that the Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA) test was not approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration until 1986.

²³ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Continuum, 1978), 108.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

by man towards his transformation into other animals, we could say that man's initial desire to exceed himself was paradoxical: insofar as it would have been directed towards the transformation of his own animality, man's originary desire would have been fulfilled through his transformation into another animal. Furthermore, Canetti states that man's desire for increase in turn necessitates the material increase of everything around him, which in turn would be necessarily accompanied by what we may call a symbolic increase.²⁵

Canetti develops his notion of transformation through his reading of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd's *Specimens of Bushmen Folklore*, which he describes as "our most valuable record of early humanity."²⁶ After describing the faculty of transformation as "one of the great mysteries," he asserts that it can be examined simplest form through the phenomenon of presentiment (which is synonymous with premonition), stating that, "The Bushmen feel the distant approach of people whom they can neither hear nor see. They also feel when game is near and will describe the signs on their own bodies by which they recognize its approach."²⁷ Canetti proceeds by citing Bleek and Lloyd's observations. In one example, a father feels that another man is approaching and tells his children that the identity of this man, who "has obviously been a long way away," is their grandfather. The father comes to this determination due to the sensation of pain on his body that corresponds to an actual wound on the grandfather's body. Bleek and Lloyd also observe that the mimetic transference of physical sensations can also occur between humans and animals. For example, a hunter may feel the rustling grass beneath his feet or have the impression that his face is striped, or he may feel a tapping on his ribs or have the sensation of blood running down his legs. These presentiments are indications to the

²⁵ Besides serving as a theory of totemism (understood here in terms of the symbolic function of a particular animal to the social group it represents), Canetti's notion of transformation bears a close resemblance to the relationship between desire and language that I have attempted to theorize throughout this paper.

²⁶ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Continuum, 1978), 337.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 337

hunter that a springbok (gazelle) is nearby: from the sensation of its movement across a field, to the black stripe on its face, to the hair that rubs against its flanks, and to the blood of the animal after being slain. This ethnographic account leads Canetti to equate presentiment with language: where he understands it as an entirely corporeal phenomenon, stating that, “They feel in their bodies that certain events are going to happen,” he also identifies the somatic with the linguistic by asserting that, “Their letters, as they say, are in their bodies. These letters speak and move and make their bodies move.”²⁸

Where Bleek and Lloyd’s ethnographic account of the operation of presentiment in indigenous, South African societies is commensurable with Joyce’s account of diagnosing cancer in her client, Canetti’s theory of presentiment also appears to anticipate the post-structural theory of psychic mediumship put forth in this thesis paper. Correspondingly, it may be possible to articulate an understanding of the function of psychic mediumship within the context of post-industrial capitalism through a continuation of Canetti’s theoretical approach. With regard to industrialism and the primordial desire for transformation, he states:

In modern industrial production the ancient substance of the increase pack has undergone such a colossal expansion that, compared with it, all the other elements of life seem to be on the wane. Production happens here, in this life. It grows and proliferates all the time and with ever-increasing speed, so that we are left with no moment for reflection.

Terrible wars have not halted it and, whatever the nature of the various opposing camps, it is rampant in all of them. If there is now one faith, it is faith in production, the modern frenzy of increase; and all the peoples of the world are succumbing to it one after the other.²⁹

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 339.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 465.

If there is indeed a an underlying faith or belief that motivates industrial capitalism, and if the drive towards transformation is realized in the acceleration of material production in the mode of modern industrialization, then perhaps what is realized in the mode of post-industrial production is the expansion of presentiment through the operation of speculation. This contrast may be understood in terms of the shift from industrial capital to finance capital, which in the context of Detroit, has been categorized under the rubric of Fordism and post-Fordism. Where the latter stage of economic development is perceived in terms of its reliance on the service industry (which again would include psychic mediumship) and financial speculation over manufacturing, as Joyce's testimony suggests, it might also be characterized in terms of a general increase in the application of presentimental judgement. In this case, I am not only referring to the practice of financial speculation (which would be categorized with presentiment insofar as it is also grounded on belief and since it at best takes the form of an educated guess) or to the increased popularity of psychic mediumship, but also to the instances where psychic mediums are specifically employed towards the prediction of financial outcomes.³⁰ However, it remains to be determined whether or not this particular, historical expression of presentiment, which operates in the guise of psychic mediumship and which can be understood as a remainder or trace of an earlier system of belief, marks a turning point in social consciousness that might possibly be developed to undo the violence of capitalist accumulation, or will merely exacerbate the condition of economic turmoil that characterizes our time.

³⁰ See Lily Koppel, "Would You Ask a Psychic for Stock Tips? More Often, Clients Do" September, 23, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/23/nyregion/23psychic.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0, and Ruth La Ferla, "Love, Jobs & 401(k)s" *The New York Times*, November 23, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/23/fashion/23psychic.html?pagewanted=all>

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