

**Kathryn Troy. *The Specter of the Indian: Race, Gender and Ghosts in American Seances, 1848-1890*. New York: SUNY, 2017. Xxx + 201pp. ISBN 978-1-4384-6609-5.**

<http://www.sunypress.edu/p-6414-the-specter-of-the-indian.aspx>

Kathryn Troy's book, though published in an Indigenous Studies context, quite possibly invites rejection by Indigenous readers and anyone sensitive to the impact of Indian stereotypes on Indigenous peoples and cultures in the colonial period. This hard to swallow quality is due to a methodological choice that Troy appears to have made early in her study: she treats the "Indian" ghosts and spirits summoned up by 19<sup>th</sup> century mediums as entities that were entirely real, at least to the people witnessing them. As she puts it in the Introduction, "To assert at the outset that all Spiritualists were knowing frauds is risky and counterproductive" (xiv). Yet for any Indigenous reader it will be hard to read a passage like the following, printed as a verbatim account of a spiritual message, as being the words of a Native spirit:

Me see among the thorns many beautiful gems, soul gems that sparkles brighter than the sun. Me see they spirit covered with dark shadows, but me is not hindered from seeing they pure spirit, it is much beautiful and me can see what your noble soul would do if unshackled... Me sees much me no tell for want of your words (59)

This sort of racist "Little Plum" mock-pidgin is common among the 19<sup>th</sup> century spirits Troy surveys, as is a sort of hyperinflated and grandiose rhetoric in the mode of Chief Seattle's (Si'ahl) well-known yet highly disputed speech. Readers can also expect to encounter lithe *indian* maidens, brave warriors, and dead war chiefs issuing words of reconciliation from beyond the grave.

Troy is not a Spiritualist herself, however, and the historical research that has gone into this book is methodical and thoroughly interrogated. It is therefore obvious that her intention is not in any way to validate the racist stereotypes that swam through the minds of 19<sup>th</sup> century charlatans and the self-deceivers and dupes that they swept up in their wake - just to show my own atheist and anti-spiritual bias for a moment. Rather, her taking of Spiritualist publications at face value allows her to entirely avoid the tricky ground of intentionality, and instead to use manifestations of *indian* spirits (the inauthenticity of which should be immediately obvious to any reader) to map out the psyches of a group of mostly wealthy, liberal, middle and upper class white Americans in relation to the genocides and land expropriations taking place in the country. The result is a fascinating case study of settler guilt made manifest in a Freudian sense, which eventually reveals some unexpected effects on actual Native American peoples of the period. Only by taking these ghosts seriously, Troy argues, can we properly account for their effect on people who witnessed séances or read the various Spiritualist newsletters.

A ghost, after all, is not the same as a dead person. As a liminal presence, *neither* dead *nor* alive, the spirits summoned up by mediums served to attest to their audiences that there would be consequences for genocide, and these would not be the consequences of a white-first version of Christianity. American Spiritualism put itself forward less as a religion than as a form of rational

enquiry. As Troy notes and then extensively shows, “Spiritualists defined the phenomena they witnessed and interpreted them through the lens of accepted contemporary sciences.” As such, when Spiritualists encountered solemn warnings from the celestial spheres that white Americans would suffer serious consequences for their actions in the destruction of Indian nations, these were far more specific in their call to action than general ethical condemnations or Christian preaching would have been. Equally, the existence of *indian* ghosts served, at least at first, as a counter to the eliminationist settler logic analysed by Patrick Wolfe and others. Native Americans could not be simply and permanently disappeared from the land, nor could their cultures be assimilated: rather, for the Spiritualists, *indians* would be an ever-present call to repent, rather in the manner of Jacob Marley.

Knowledge of what was happening in the celestial spheres was necessarily incomplete, fragmentary and on many occasions contradictory. Just as with UFO sightings or Satanic child abuse panics, the very fact that such contradictions were being discussed and analysed within the community fed into the narrative that the movement was at base scientific. One element that was especially hotly debated, in a country plunging into and then recovering from the Civil War, was that of race. Troy follows Robert Cox in arguing that most Spiritualists were persuaded by the messages from beyond that race eventually became irrelevant as spirits progressed through the celestial spheres, and that the afterlife would be “devoid of distinctions and categorizations based on differing religious or political affiliations” (68). As Indian chiefs were seen as spiritually strong and/or pure, they progressed unusually quickly to the higher spheres. Though many historians have stated that *indian* spirits mainly functioned to “forgive” whites, Troy notes that this forgiveness was targeted: only spiritual investigators with the wit to listen, understand and act were sent messages of benevolence.

It needs to be mentioned that this was not a fringe movement. Hardcore Spiritualism certainly counted several hundred thousand adherents, while as many as eleven million people – out of a population of no more than twenty five million – held at least some Spiritualist beliefs, attended the occasional séance or semi-regularly read Spiritualist publications. A significant number of US citizens, therefore, were able to experience Cheyenne Chief White Antelope, who had been murdered in the Sand Creek massacre, telling the still-living Colonel John Chivington that he would not gain access to the higher spiritual realms after death, as his victims had, but would continue to “walk the earth in shadows and thorns will spring up and pierce his feet” (83). And Troy’s research demonstrates that many of these spiritual researchers felt themselves impelled by *indian* spirits to take action to try to actively aid living Native peoples and cultures. Spiritualist editorials fulminated against Indian wars, cast doubt on reports of *indian* savagery, publicised the crimes of Chivington and Sherman, and happily reported the shade of Custer admitting his guilt and shame.

White wealthy do-gooders with a strong urge to help but no real knowledge of the cultures and communities that they wanted to aid – just their own projections and imaginings made manifest in ectoplasm, hair snatched from the spirit realm, and the sound of leather moccasins in the dark of the séance room? What could possibly go wrong? Troy demonstrates that leading Spiritualists such as Colonel Samuel Tappan, husband to Cora Hatch (one of the most renowned mediums in

the country) took an active role in the various “friends of the Indian” societies. Spiritualists raised funds and lobbied Congress until something was done to avert the terrible fate that their spirit guides warned faced the United States. The form that that “something” took, however, was the foundation of boarding schools at Carlisle and elsewhere, and the creation of programmes to turn Indians into self-sufficient smallholders. As Troy puts it, “The Dawes Act made a reality all that Spiritualists hoped to accomplish on behalf of Indians” (149). While Spiritualist influence may have been a brake on overtly genocidal actions (I here follow Wolfe’s distinction between genocide and settler colonial eliminationism), much as today’s superficially woke “colour-blind” white activists may help to forestall the rise of neo-Nazism, Spiritualists failed to understand the impact of seemingly benevolent enforced assimilation. Troy’s well-written and thoroughly researched study, rather depressingly, suggests that the energies from the colonial guilt physically intruding into the séance room was simply diverted into another part of the elimination process.

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