

Trance Speakers: Femininity and Authorship in Spiritual Séances, 1850-1930 by Claudie Massicotte

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litical climate is considered in this context too. One of the verities was that these new-Canadians are over-represented in the 118 deaths in the 1913-32 construction period. But, other than a small plaque at the Seaway headquarters in St. Catherines, there is no public memorial to those killed on the Welland Ship Canal.

For Styran and Taylor, however, even the “most impressive monument in the world” cannot capture the working life of

the ordinary ‘navvy’ and so, “To those thousands of unsung heroes who worked ‘on the ground’ this book is dedicated.” (244). Further, Robert Taylor and I add that given Roberta Styran’s passing in 2015 prior to the publication of this book, it should be dedicated to her in memory of her decades of scholarship on the Welland.

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Trance Speakers

Femininity and Authorship in Spiritual Séances, 1850-1930

By Claudie Massicotte

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017. 280 pages \$110.00

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Séances conjure up images of darkened rooms, strewn with cloaks and blankets, people gathered in a circle awaiting with baited breath the transmission of a message from a dear departed family or friend through a spiritual medium. While such events certainly engage the imagination, Claudie Massicotte argues that séances and how we “read” them provide so much more valuable insight into gender identity and how women understood their place in turn of the century Canadian society.

In *Trance Speakers*, Massicotte engages readers to understand séances led by women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a means by which women asserted control over their bodies, gained entrance into the political sphere, and negotiated their place in the social order of Canadian society. As suggested in the title, the place of authorship provides a strong thematic backbone to a work that focuses on the way mediums challenged and even

subverted the ideology of separate spheres.

The structure of the book helps to reinforce its analytical focus. The first part examines the historical context of mediumship in Canada, and differentiates the experience in Canada from the United States. Massicotte relates the popularity and cultural relevance of mediumship to ideas about proper and modern womanhood and to the growth of spiritualism as a religious movement. Further, it outlines the framework in which Massicotte interprets the work of mediums in order to assess how these women responded to the prevailing historical context, and establishes how authorship provides a vital way to understand the experience of séances as opposed to more established interpretations of the cultural effects of séances.

The second part of the book is divided into four chapters: Healing, Writing, Speaking, and Performing. “Healing” charts the interconnection between

medical and psychological discourse and mediumship. Séances provided a space for some women to confront prevailing medical views about hysteria. “Writing” makes the connection between mediumship and creative endeavours. “Speaking” interprets the way participation in public séances provided female mediums the ability to gain entrance into political debates. Finally, “Performing” traces séances through the war and inter-war years as a performative space in which women could explore and renegotiate their place in the social order.

Massicotte is at her strongest analytically when she uses and interprets text such as journals or personal correspondence like that between Susanna Moodie and Richard Bentley, her friend and editor. The close reading helps to explain the way that mediums explored their own agency in society, and thus developed a particular kind of authorship that, in the case of Moodie, allowed her to explore the connection between “her literary ambitions and her internalization of dominant ideas of womanhood” (107). Moodie was not alone. Massicotte further surveys the connection in a discussion of Annie Florence Smith. An author who lived in Montreal, Smith did not share Moodie’s reputation in the field of Canadian literature, but nonetheless employed similar tropes. Smith’s work demonstrated how “in séances, the medium could become the bearer of meaningful enunciations despite social and

ideological restrictions upon her sex” (111).

Massicotte draws a number of interesting and note-worthy conclusions. She observes how spiritual channeling created a space in which women could assert their own voice, speak for male participants, and even confront and problematize gender identity. Séances might have provided a gate for the ghosts of the past to visit upon the present, but it also provided the women mediums the opportunity to speak for these ghosts, and thus become authors of the past either specific or general.

In a work that knits historical, literary, and psychoanalytical methodologies, *Trance Speakers* ambitiously asks how mediumship as a unique form of ventriloquism can be used to understand the modes and methods by which women could and did express themselves, and in so doing how they disrupted dominant discourses of gender, politics, and identity. Massicotte nicely speaks to the way occurrences such as séances need not be viewed solely as marginal events or examples of paranormal science and psychology, but rather as complex instances that provide insight into the establishment and negotiation of gender identity by women as they sought to understand and interrupt male-dominated institutions. Her work is a fine contribution to a growing literature that examines female agency and authorship.

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